

Socializing Realism's Balance of Power: Collective Identity as Alliance Formation in Iraq

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# Socializing Realism's Balance of Power: Collective Identity as Alliance Formation In Iraq<sup>1</sup>

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What is perhaps missed when observing alliances found in international politics is the social residue of partnerships. This anthropocentric claim occupies a social epistemology, is constructed and motivated by culture, and fostered towards collective ontological maintenance. Though operating as metaphysical, how would such reification modify the objectivism reflected in realist alignment theories, particularly the balance-of-power, balance-of-threats, and balance-of-interests? In confronting this question, the Shiite-Kurdish alignment in post-Saddam Iraq is examined, to which each realist proposition ends up exhibiting a degree of surfeit imbalances. Yet rather than exclusively focusing on material and individualistic properties, this article attempts to promote the aspect of social alliances, suggesting that mutual desire towards stabilizing ontological status may conflict with the implications of external physicalist disparities. In this regard, key Shiites and Kurds, through the process of culturizing their collective traumas and historical memories had both accomplished basic trust, inter-subjectively putting into practice their Kantian 'friendship', skewing realism's objective fix on alliances. In attempting to systematically incorporate an identity function in alliance formation, a dualistic balance-of-identities theory is offered, underlining a holistic condition corresponding to any realist thought on alignment patterns.

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Are realist determinants in international relations (IR) theory only contingent on a materialist-inclined epistemology? To be more direct, are alignments amongst state actors simply a product of the externalities of material circumstances? Though most that practice the theoretical tradition would seem bent on agreeing, what is habitually neglected within the paradigm is the prospect of *identification*, as an instrument towards 'socialized' partnerships.

Yet to treat states as social organisms would be to inadvertently attribute to them the very metaphysical properties we usually associate with personhood – in effect – ascribing to them among other qualities: memories, emotions, and an intrinsic

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yearning for ontological status and stability.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, given an anthropocentrism on partnership ontology, a social feature is possible. If incorporating this thought, international alliance theory can necessitate the acknowledgment that relations can become personalized, attachments can spawn, and identification can exemplify much gravitas than realists deem. Surely, if interests are a motive towards political engagement, identity is an ontological *de rigueur* towards consciousness of those interests. As Samuel P. Huntington had once candidly written: “National interest derives from national identity. We have to know who we are before we can know what our interests are”.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, when observing alignments amongst state actors, many realists have held up balance-of-power dynamics as a natural proclivity of world politics. Indeed, as Kenneth N. Waltz had insisted, “As nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors unbalanced power”.<sup>5</sup> Though many IR theorists deviate from the centralism of ‘power’ in systemic configurations, all prescribe that alliances fundamentally inherit an epistemic objectivism, mutually determined on the centric values assigned to security/interests. In attempting to provide a dialectic harmony with this feature, what can be theorized about the role that identity would occupy in balancing politics? Offering a constructivist approach towards the identity function, this article claims that alliance formations amongst actors are *not always*, as realists would adamantly maintain, a saturated commonality of materialized expression.

Often time assigned a peripheral status, what is perhaps most overlooked by skeptics is the underlining ‘first-cut’ feature that identity can produce in the alliance-making process. To be sure, collective identity is an inter-subjective project, and because as such, we can perhaps think about *social alliances* in parallel with the Kantian logic of international politics. Organized and safeguarded towards ontological fostering, socialized alliances would suggest an interdependence relation that is reified, escaping the usual physicalist features placed on usual liberal economic properties. Indeed, the idea of actors becoming subjectively interdependent would subsume the possibility of an ontological collective security.

But dimensionally, in the symbolic universe of international political life, how would such a reified aspect epistemically *coincide* with the ‘hard’ mannerism of balance-of-power politics? Does one solidify or abate the other? In accordance with addressing this question, this article suggests that when judging balancing politics, collective identity dynamics – in terms of inter-subjective variations of Selfness and Otherness – can modify the credence that realism assigns towards its material properties in propagating those alignments.

By acknowledging this claim, an extreme circumstance would then imply a collective identity as an alliance formation – in turn – alleging an identity-centric

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<sup>3</sup> Wendt (2004), p. 289. Note: Like rationality, identities, interests, and beliefs which are explicitly stated as properties associated with human beings and state personhood, the aspects of memories, emotions, and ontological stability can also be implied here as belonging to persons and states.

<sup>4</sup> Huntington (1997), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Waltz (2000), p. 28

partnership. Such salience – accessible in many ethnic atrocities found in world history – would place ‘us against them’ as Capulets against Montagues, with no input from the sovereign condition. Rational choice, in this case, would simply not have conscious primacy. Indeed, hypothetically speaking, if Great Britain were attacked by Iran, American ‘state Self-concept’ would lack any embodied process in *choosing* whom to support, as national consciousness would deindividuate in collectivizing an extended ‘Us’. In this respect, saturated social alliances would question the very ontological status of modern sovereignty, since ‘choice’ is metaphysically and exogenously challenged by the dilution of state consciousness and identity, theoretically positioning mind partly outside its body.

Nonetheless, though identity is a primary subject here and in much social constructivist literature, alliance politics has been historically a realist game. Likewise, scholarship on the effects of identity on alliance making is underdeveloped, lacking a *systematic* approach in corresponding with the established materialist domains. In attempting to provide such a framework, this article focuses on understanding the convoluted politics of post-Baathist Iraq. Though the case study is an internal affair and elucidates its unusual alignments, that ought not to take away what it can illuminate about the conduct of international relations. In orderly fashion, I introduce the Iraq case as a puzzle towards realist alliance theory.

### *A Realist Puzzle*

Since the 2003 American-led invasion, Iraq had been subject to a “power vacuum”, leading various players to satiate it – a common problematic feature encompassed by realist theory. However, what ought to be peculiar to all alliance theorists is the formation of a Shiite-Kurdish alliance, where both groups – situated in the tribalism and identity salience of Middle East politics – differ in religion, ethnicity, and language.

From a realist standpoint, one would have to contend that Shiite Arabs and Kurds had joined forces to neutralize a common threat and/or foster recognized shared interests, provided by the division and allocation of the spoils of victory. However, both communities to a large extent have diverging interests on the key issues. Conversely, Sunni Arabs and Kurds share a common religious identity and adhere more on interests in relation to the rising power of the new Shiite majority.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, when considering that Shiites and Kurds now claim great power status, the puzzle practically presents itself: Why is there not a balance-of-power amongst Iraq’s political actors? Reflectively, why are Kurds bandwagoning – rather than joining their Sunni brothers – in balancing against Shiite domination? With the fall of their common Baathist enemies, the disintegration of the Iraqi military, and the overwhelming American presence, any astute observer would have to wonder: What is the threat that is *forcing* Shiites and Kurds to bond today?

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<sup>6</sup> Note: A minority of Shiite Kurds, also called *Faylis*, reside in Iraq, but around 90 % of the community is Sunni Muslim.

## Political Realities

Violence and instability are certainly not epistemologically exogenous to the political culture of the Middle East. In disproportion to an ostensibly perpetual *liberal drift* seen in contemporary Western societies, the Middle East has in many instances witnessed its social and political institutions ‘revert back’ to a prior inter-subjectivity. This to be certain: ideas may drive change to happen, but not exclusively in which direction. Indeed, as Walid Phares, the world-renowned scholar of the Middle East put it: “The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed two parallel intellectual debates: one within the West, over which path to follow for the future, and another in the East, about which past to bring into the future – secular nationalism or Islamic fundamentalism”.<sup>7</sup> Such ‘torn’ societal dialogues are ongoing in present-day Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and most notably Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

Yet throughout the post-Saddam era, rarely is it the case that journalists and policymakers do justice to the sheer complexity and multifaceted political culture – often offering ethnicities as monolithic actors in a religious, sectarian confined struggle – unaware of particularities, ill-conceived about universal assumptions. This main section seeks to reconstruct a more accurate picture of Iraq, for it is necessary before going on any further. First, and most important, it is essential to provide the case that Iraq’s realities satisfy the criteria for which realism theory can validly participate. Secondly, a contemporary description of Iraqi politics is needed. But since the domestic situation is highly convoluted, it is impossible to do justice here to the overwhelming historical and political intricacies shaping today’s polity. Yet for the purposes of the arguments and key personalities mentioned afterwards, I will focus on presenting a clear and concise background of the major political groupings. In compliance with the topics of this section, a more appreciative understanding is possible when confronting the puzzle set forth in this article.

### *An Internal Anarchy*

When judging balancing politics, it is essential to adhere to the appropriate theoretical framework on which such conditions arise. Indeed, as Kenneth Waltz had standardized, a system that is anarchic is necessary for balance of power politics to sort out.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the units populating that system must have a desire and will to survive. Though the latter attitude may be considered a given in accords to the Iraq case, the position towards anarchy as an *internal condition*, rather than the usual international order, needs further elaboration than realist literature would presumably imply.

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<sup>7</sup> Phares (2007), p. xi

<sup>8</sup> Huntington (1993), p. 42. Note: Huntington defines ‘torn countries’ as divided over which civilization they want to belong to, in effect claiming an identity crisis.

<sup>9</sup> Waltz (1979), p. 121

Though to be sure, Avery Goldstein had suggested a similar methodological logic in prescribing an internal anarchy based on explaining a “structural alternative” on Chinese politics, arguing that: “by focusing on structure and identifying the necessary conditions for the relevance of balance-of-power theory, it is possible to explain...why the logic and metaphorical language informed by such a theory are so appropriate in understanding the political events of the cultural revolutionary years”.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the key assumption argued in this section: Iraq is plagued with an internal anarchy, consistent with the realist attitude of international politics. Moreover, the groups involved are confined to similar unfortunate conditions, such as zero-sum games, security dilemmas, uncertainty, and mistrust – yet with more of a Hobbesian than Lockean culture.

In June 2006, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman referred to the deteriorating security situation in Iraq as “insurgency out, anarchy in”.<sup>11</sup> But anarchy is not necessarily a higher end on a peace-war continuum since it can mean several different things depending on which discipline is practiced. In the realm of foreign affairs – that consistent with journalists and policymakers – anarchy often refers to a state of lawlessness and disorder. Usually described in the context of ‘chaos’, anarchy brings to mind the notion of rampant and ungoverned violence – conceived of an absence of order rather than an order in of itself. In the context of IR and social science – that which is presumed here – anarchy is a theoretical social and structural state-of-system, arising from the absence of an arbiter – one who has the ability to enforce agreements among the contentious parties. This condition, from the structural realist standpoint, naturally determines a self-help political culture.

As mentioned, the U.S.-led toppling of the Iraqi regime had accordingly created a so-called “power vacuum”. Since then, the country has been subject to volatility, immense violence, looting, sectarian strife, lawlessness, terrorist and militia formations, human trafficking, radicalization, displacement, ethnic cleansing, mass elite corruption, daily political assassinations, social fragmentation, and political and security infiltrations by informal regional actors. Yet many have blamed such cataclysm on an American presence – implying that Iraq’s order is that of a contingent anarchy. Indeed, while echoing Democratic Congressman John Murtha’s withdrawal theory, many like Mark Weisbrot asserted that “the very presence of U.S. troops is the number one cause of violence, terrorism, and a possible degeneration into a full-scale civil war”, while adding that “when American soldiers leave...the chances for a peaceful, negotiated solution will increase”.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, this belief exhibits a palpable misunderstanding of Iraq’s political and security realities. Indeed, when confronted about the occupation being counterproductive to Iraqi security, Zalmay Khalilzad had addressed the common misperception in *grouping* the killings as a universal product, rather claiming the

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<sup>10</sup> Goldstein (1990), p. 316

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Friedman, “Insurgency Out, Anarchy In”, *New York Times*, June 2, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Weisbrot, “It’s time to leave Iraq”, Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2006.

violence as generally conceiving of multifaceted fronts – each sovereign of one another; each motivated by particular goals.<sup>13</sup>

- (1) *Overall Insurgency* – Those fighting in direct opposition to the American occupation; usually crossing over from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria.
- (2) *Terrorist Organizations* – Groups (i.e. al-Qaeda in Iraq) consisting of radical Sunni Salafists and Wahabists, unbiased towards their victims, seeking to establish an Islamic confined territory governed by *Sharia* Islamic Law.
- (3) *Sectarianism* – Between Shiite and Sunni groups, usually involving the ethnic cleansing of entire neighborhoods. The conflict was exacerbated after the February 2006 bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samara.
- (4) *Shiite on Shiite Violence* – Religious rivalries competing for power and territory among the Shiite community.

Consequently – in confronting Murtha and others – it is unlikely the case that Iraqi anarchy is characterized as a contingent order, exogenously determined by American policymakers. Regime change may have lead to such an order, but its illogic to base that the present order can ‘revert back’ in any causational function provided by troop withdrawal. To be certain, three of the four violent fronts as suggested by Khalilzad – which in practice constitute the most danger – will nonetheless still subsist and likely grow.

More consistent with the appropriate definition in this context, Robert Dreyfuss had described Iraq in October 2006 as “utterly anarchic, a Mad Max world” consisting of “clashing paramilitaries, gangs, warlords, sectarian fighters, death squads, criminal enterprises, government-backed mafias, and several hundred thousand army men, police, Interior Ministry commandos and special units...only loosely under the control of the central government”.<sup>14</sup>

Some of course may be skeptical of Iraq’s internal structure as truly anarchic since a Baghdad government exists. A fair argument, after all, is it not the case that central governments ought to represent the arbiter that enforces agreements among the domestic factions? But unfortunately for Iraq, this is simply not concurring with the politics of the new state. As Feisal Istrabadi, one of the foremost individuals associated with the country’s new constitutional framework, frustratingly put it, “there is no Iraqi government”, observing it as an illusion.<sup>15</sup> When concerning the results of the American pressure for democratically held elections, he stated, “What did we accomplish, exactly, [with] this push towards an appearance of institutions...merely an appearance”.<sup>16</sup>

To be certain, Iraq is anarchic in the idea that power is diffused to numerous independent groups, competing against one another without an effective authority to

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<sup>13</sup> At the time of the comments, Zalmay Khalilzad was the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq (2006-2007) and had mentioned these four violent fronts during a November 14, 2006 interview with the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, DC for which I personally attended.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Dreyfuss, “A coup in the air”, *Asia Times*, October 21, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Aram Roston, “Ex-top envoy calls Iraqi government a failure”, *MSNBC*, October 19, 2007

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

enforce agreements among them. Less in terms of a *single state* in the organizational Weberian conception, Iraq does not exercise uniformly, a monopolized legitimate use of force within its given geographic borders. To clarify, Baghdad's authority is composed as a bottom-up contingency, dependent and consisting of pre-established groups, primarily glued together on paper, who have by informally yet accepted standards, attached with them their own loyalties and militias controlling given territories. Indeed, consider the following March 2008 description of a firefight in *Time Magazine*:

This week's violence in Baghdad and Basra followed several days of bloodshed in the Shi'ite city of Kut, some 100 miles southeast of the capital, where Sadr loyalists clashed with police forces largely controlled by their Shi'ite rivals, the Badr Corps militants of the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, and with government troops affiliated with Maliki's Da'awa party.<sup>17</sup>

Factions within an army brigade, police force, or cabinet ministry are controlled in a multifaceted and convoluted "unofficial" chain-of-command. Common in Third World states, the Iraqi government is constructed between competing loyalties, undermining the idea of '*state*' *sovereignty*. But when and if accepting that premise, skeptics may contend that the U.S. presence satiates an arbiter. But domestic politics in Iraq can be viewed as interactions on two independent levels. At a micro level – as just described – is a clashing of militias, parties, and the like. However, on a macro level – Iraqi politics is ostensibly international. Indeed, states like Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States exhibit internal roles. From Baghdad to Arbil, Najaf to Basra, Kirkuk to Mosul – the United States is more so a political actor rather than arbiter, competing with others at the systemic level in pressuring various factions to adhere towards its interests and against the interests of their rivals.

Another argument that skeptics may make is the idea that international relations is expected to remain situated in an anarchic order, while in Iraq, anarchy is contingent on the *expectation* that a sustainable government will eventually come about. But this claim lacks credibility on two levels. The first is a basic flaw in assuming that Iraqis expect anything and behave accordingly. Indeed, uncertainty in Iraq is more prevalent than the sovereign-assured international system. Not much is really guaranteed. Though the security situation is supposedly improving, the Shiite-Kurdish alignment came about at a time well before any optimistic expectation could have possibly existed.

The second misjudgment is the illogic behind linking expectation with cooperation. Indeed, depending on the cultural context, expectations can have varying actions attached to them. Because of intense suspicions and lack of any trust or social institutions, if Sunnis, Kurds, and Shiites all expected a solidified government in the near future, they would perhaps compete, not cooperate, in

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<sup>17</sup> Darrin Mortenson, "The Threat of a Re-Surge in Iraq", *Time Magazine*, March 24, 2008.



gaining leverage before such an order assumed form. To be suggestive, if Iraq were not anarchic, it would surely be Shiite-dominated.

In a prudent observation by Charles Krauthammer, Iraq's democratic government came out to be "hopelessly feeble and fractured, little more than a *collection of ministries* handed over to various parties, militias, and strongman".<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Iraq's government is not a nationally expressed institution, epistemologically conceived of a national identity. The inhabitants are rooted out of historically different communities, only to be held together by the brutality of dictators.

What's more explicatory, like other supranational polity projects practiced among European states, the 'idea' of Iraq in the metaphysical sense can be seen as a contingent expression – a 'community of tribes' if you will. In other words, unlike most sovereign entities populating contemporary world politics, Iraq is most dominantly perceived by its inhabitants as the *state of states* rather than the *states of state*. Though a central government exists – like the relation between the United Nations and sovereign international states – it claims universal representation of exogenously predetermined political entities that collectively pass legislation only to have it lack enforcement and binding legitimate authority. As King Faisal I said of his country in 1932: "In this regard and with my heart filled with sadness, I have to say that it is my belief that there is no Iraqi people inside Iraq. There are only diverse groups with no national sentiments. They are filled with superstitious and false religious traditions with no common ground between them".<sup>19</sup>

## A Brief Look at Contemporary Politics

Kenneth Waltz had suggested that systems of three players inherited "unfortunate characteristics" because "two of the powers can easily gang up on the third".<sup>20</sup> This triad polity is what many journalists have both explicitly and implicitly presented over the course of reporting on Iraqi affairs. Indeed, in avoiding the convoluted cultural and political mess found in post-Saddam society, analysts and policymakers in the foreign affairs business have painted Iraq as a clear-cut sectarian divide, viewing relations within the state at a supposed systemic level, consisting of three primary political communities – Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. This outlook would presume that like states at the international level, these communities internally have their local disputes and tugging for influence, but in relation to the other "system actors", inter-communal politics is essentially external. Though this presumption may seem pleasing to the eye and prevalent in international media circles, the picture is an ostensible representation of domestic interethnic relations. Indeed, it is not necessarily Sunni versus Shiite, Kurd versus Sunni in any holistic or naturally ordained sense. Nor is it the case that Iraqi history had always been sectarian,

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "Why Iraq is Crumbling", *Jewish World Review*, November 17, 2006

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Allawi (2007), p. 17

<sup>20</sup> Waltz (1979), p. 163

though the suspicions are indeed present today between the generalities of ethnic and religious communities.

### *The New Majority*

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, pre-existing political entities and their respective militias have largely dominated Iraq's new politics. The Shiite Arabs, who make up Iraq's ethnic majority with nearly 60% of the population – were perhaps the biggest winners of Operation Iraqi Freedom. To be sure, the American invasion had propelled a Shiite revivalism, in southern Iraq and regionally. But unfortunately for them, and perhaps a relief to the other ethnic groups, the Shiites are not a monolith community. Indeed, subsequent Sunni regimes have manipulated Shiite identity and national symbols to fragment the community. The competing hierarchy of the Shiite religion had fractured loyalties between Ayatollahs and Islamic philosophies. Shiite on Shiite violence is highly demonstrated in southern Iraq between historic religious rivalries. Today, Iraq's ethnic majority exhibits deep cuts, between Islamists and secularists, nationalists and pan-*Shi'atism*. Iran's acceptance of millions of Iraqi Shiite refugees had over time solidified sympathetic identification towards Tehran, while many others maintain an anti-Persian position, remembering the eight-year war during the 1980s.

Within the 275-member Council of Representatives (CoR), various independent parties are embedded in larger political coalitions, with sect as the main distinguishing factor. The most powerful political force is the Supreme Islamic Iraq Council (SIIC) – formerly recognized by its acronym SCIRI – which had won 30 CoR seats in the December 2005 elections. Highly organized and politically developed, SIIC was founded in Iran in 1982 by the influential Iraqi-exile Ayatollah Mohammad Bakir al-Hakim. Today, the party is the top beneficiary of Tehran's footprint in Iraq, as its military arm – the Badr Brigade – had been trained and funded by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Fighting side-by-side with the IRGC during the Iran-Iraq War, Badr is today's most powerful Shiite militia. Being an Ayatollah of respectful religious credentials, Hakim had successfully integrated the powers of militancy and *Shi'atism* as a political force.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, by the time the Baathists were out, Hakim had been perceived as the key Shiite *political* figure in the new Iraq.

In August 2003, after Friday prayers at the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, Bakir al-Hakim had been killed along with nearly 100 others by a large car bomb.<sup>22</sup> His younger brother, Sayyid Abdul Aziz al-Hakim had taken leadership of SIIC since. Pressured by the suspicions of Iranian ties, Abdul Aziz had expressed his relatively moderate proclivities by removing the [Islamic] "Revolution" in SCIRI, not to exclude making visits to Washington think tanks, and meeting with President George W. Bush at the White House. In addition to being SIIC's leader, Hakim also is the coalition leader of the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) – the largest political

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<sup>21</sup> Allawi (2007), p. 112

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 172

bloc that had at one time claimed 138 parliamentary seats before the exiting of 15 from the Fadhila (Islamic Virtue) Party and 30 belonging to the notorious cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

The UIA had given the South a sense of community, at least temporarily amongst the religious Shiites. Indeed, the coalition's blessing by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani had promoted a divined sense of legitimacy, complementing their Iranian support in dominating the Iraqi elections. By adopting a single electoral list, the various Shiite parties attempted in making Shiite power reflect the majority status. Indeed, the UIA has since dominated the control of Iraq's most powerful ministries, including Finance and Oil. With 25 members representing the UIA, the *Daawa al-Islamiyah* (Islamic Call Party) – founded in the 1960s by the Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Bakir al-Sadr – has benefited by SIIC's suspicious Islamism and Iran ties and Muqtada al-Sadr's radicalism, in claiming the prime minister's office twice – represented by Ibrahim al-Jaafari and his successor Nouri Kamal al-Maliki. However, the UIA had never in its existence claimed absolute representation of the Shiite community, despite its dominant role in Baghdad. For example, Muqtada al-Sadr, though once a member of the UIA, his chief rival had always been its leader, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim. Tugging for influence among religious circles, much of Shiite on Shiite violence is ascribed to the tension between Sadr's notorious *Jaysh al-Mahdi* (JAM) militia and the Badr Brigade.

An additional blessing for Sunnis and Kurds, other influential secular Shiites had cut into the constituency, limiting UIA's potential power. Among them include Ahmad Chalabi, the leader of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), who had served as Iraq's interim deputy prime minister. Initially the Pentagon's choice for prime minister, Chalabi had fallen out of favor with the U.S. military after suspicion surfaced that he was giving away American secrets to Tehran. Deciding to withdraw from the UIA, the INC ended up performing poorly in the December elections, securing no elected representatives. Nonetheless, Chalabi has proven to be a resilient political survivor, while achieving the chairmanship of the De-Baathification Committee. Another Shiite personality undercutting the prospects of UIA hegemony is Ayad Allawi, Iraq's former interim prime minister, who heads the Iraqi National Accord (INA). His list is the only respectable cross-sectarian, secular party in Iraq – once holding 25 seats – before the exiting of the Iraqi Communist Party. Though relatively liked by many Shiites – and largely favorable to both Sunnis and Kurds because of his secularism and anti-Iranian stance – Allawi lacks the adequate political support in regaining the prime minister's office due to the UIA's dominant position.

### ***The Former Hegemonic Community***

The Sunni Arabs were obviously going to be the biggest losers in a post-Saddam society. Mostly confined around the center of the country, they had been effectively cut off from Iraq's oil reserves – concentrated in the Shiite South and the Kurdish North. Likewise, after the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) disintegrated the Iraq Army and applied de-Baathification throughout the governmental structure, the

Sunnis had officially become the most inferior of the three major ethnic communities. Representing around 20% of the Iraqi population, they have historically maintained control over the majority Shiite Arabs. Hence, their concern over an American invasion was indeed legitimate: What would become of them when Shiites seek their revenge? Though many Sunnis had been physical victims of regime oppression, they had not been subject to the sort of systematic targeting as a community – in contrast to the suppression of the Shiite and Kurdish identities.

Regretting the decision in boycotting the January 2005 elections, the Sunnis had since then made some relative gains. Two major Iraqi political blocs represent the Sunni community: the Iraqi Accordance Front (IAF – *Tawafuq*) led by Adnan al-Dulaimi and the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue led by Saleh al-Mutlaq – who refused to join the IAF in the December elections. Apart from Dulaimi's independent party, two others make up the IAF list – the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) led by Iraqi Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi and the smaller Iraqi National Dialogue Council led by Khalaf al-Ulawayan. Established in 1960 and evolving from the Muslim Brotherhood Movement, the IIP had joined Dulaimi in making the IAF the Sunni version of the Shiite UIA – securing 44 total seats in Iraq's Council of Representatives. Mutlaq's bloc had achieved 11 representatives. Though still underrepresented in several Iraqi provinces, the Sunnis will be the most likely to gain seats if and when another election is held.

### *Kurdish Exceptionalism*

In orderly fashion, before beginning to address realism's discrepancy towards the Iraq case, it is imperative to make one note clear regarding the peculiarity of the Kurdish circumstance. In a prior section, the goal was to demonstrate that Iraq's internal order corresponds to the structure of the international system with respect to the basic idea that both are anarchic – plagued by the absence of a central arbiter. Furthermore, similar to Kenneth Waltz's reference of the relationship between firms and market, Iraq's internal anarchy assumes a self-help system inhabited by factions motivated to survive by maximizing their power and security. And like realism's pessimistic nature, cooperation is problematic in Iraq due to security dilemmas, uncertainty, mistrust, and the like. This section claims a step further than what was previously argued – in effect – crystallizing the notion that we can think of Iraq more in terms of international relations and not just as a microcosm of it.

Since the end of the Kurdish civil war in the late-1990s, the two dominant and contentious parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Massoud Barzani and the left-leaning Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by Jalal Talabani – had come together to form a Kurdish alliance in confronting Iraq's new political realities. During the December 2005 elections, the two parties ran on the same political list: the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan, which obtained 53 seats in the CoR – second only to the UIA. The third largest Kurdish party, the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) ran separately but was able to secure 5 representatives. Having the largest voter turnout among the three ethnic communities, Kurds were able to achieve key posts in Baghdad. Jalal Talabani, the

charismatic PUK leader with immense experience and international contacts, was chosen to represent Iraq as its President, while Massoud Barzani was given the presidency of the KRG. Likewise, Hoshiyar Zebari (KDP) and Barham Saleh (PUK) were selected as foreign minister and deputy prime minister, respectively.

Representing between 15-20% of Iraq's population and unlike the previous two groups, Kurds are not Arabs and likewise embrace a distinct ethnicity and language - geographically spanned over four states – Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey.<sup>23</sup> Since 2003, many Iraqi Kurds had perceived the toppling of Saddam as a big step towards gaining independence. Though perhaps statehood is unlikely, Kurds have over time achieved a considerable degree of political and economic autonomy.

To international theorists, the internal affairs of Iraq often go unaware because their specialization (and attention) is just that – international. But a closer look at the new democratic country will lead one to evidently notice its atypical governmental structure. Indeed, Iraq can be visualized as two states within one – inhibiting a Baghdad national government in unison with an Arbil regional government. In more ways than one, the interaction between Arbil and Baghdad in addition to the relations between Arbil and other foreign governments, constitute in practice – the political, economic, and diplomatic relations between two sovereign states.

After the no-fly-zones initiated in 1991 by Operation Provide Comfort (OPC), Iraqi Kurdistan has gone through a cultural metamorphosis of political and social restructuring. The security provided by the U.S.-led initiative had effectively stimulated a revival in constructing and forging a distinct [Iraqi] Kurdish identity. With security sustained, the Kurds were able to transcend the Kurdish language into the “public sphere” which took root in schools, print media, and broadcasting – not to exclude symbolic celebrations through the Kurdish flag and the building of statues in honoring Kurdish heroes such as the legendary Mallah Mustafa Barzani.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in 1992 the Kurds commenced democratic elections and established on July 4 the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) – practicing for the first time since 1920, their own self-governance.<sup>25</sup> Indeed culturally transformative for all Iraqi Kurds, as Ofra Bengio describes: “A new political language has emerged which refers to these institutions in the terminology of statehood: Kurds speak of the “Government of Kurdistan”, the “Prime Minister”, “cabinet ministers,” and the like”.<sup>26</sup> With the fall of Saddam Hussein and the events leading towards the passing of Iraq's Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) by the 25-member Governing Council, the Kurdish political leadership had succeeded in creating a *de facto* independent state.

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<sup>23</sup> Note: The Kurdish population in Iraq is uncertain because of an outdated census, genocidal campaign, and a large amount of displaced refugees in Turkey and Iran. The 15-20% is taken from the CIA World FactBook (Iraq) and is the range commonly agreed upon by scholars and policymakers.

<sup>24</sup> Bengio, “Autonomy in Kurdistan in Historical Perspective”, in O'Leary et al (ed.) 2005, p. 176

<sup>25</sup> Marr (2004), p. 277-78

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 177

The TAL, as rightly esteemed, was recognized as a historic Middle Eastern document in of itself – providing the blueprint for Iraq’s Transitional Government and its latter permanent constitution. Many Shiites and Sunnis contest that their Kurdish counterparts received too good of a deal from the TAL. Certainly legitimate when considering where Iraqi Kurdistan stands today – a prospect that has spearheaded regional concerns of pan-Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Proving to be quite able and savvy negotiators, the Kurds made sure that the new Iraq would not diminish the benefits of what they already had accomplished since 1991, consequently promoting their resolute to secure more gains. Today, Iraqi Kurdistan, in all its functional capacity is characteristic of an ordinary state.

For example, Kurds were able to keep their military, the so-called *peshmerga*, intact, independent from the national army. Answerable to only the KRG, today’s *peshmerga* consist of over 100,000 highly trained and disciplined fighters. Their skill was highly noticeable as they were the only standing militia allowed to jointly work with U.S. forces during the initial invasion. In addition, the KRG controls its own intelligence agencies and police forces. The Arbil government comprises of legitimate political institutions like the 105-member parliament deemed the “Kurdistan National Assembly”, which has the power, among other things, to write “Kurdistan’s criminal, civil, and commercial law; environmental protection; regulation of public land; running an educational system that includes three universities; and the definition and protection of human rights in the region.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the institutionalized executive branch consists of a Council of Ministers, led by the enforcement of a KRG President and Prime Minister.

Likewise, the TAL had provided the supremacy of Kurdish law over all aspects of the region with the exclusion of a few delegated to Baghdad’s authority. These federal powers would be limited to monetary policy, foreign policy, defense policy, and customs.<sup>28</sup> Though the federal boundaries seem overarching, in practice, they are not all encompassing. For example, national defense policy is not implemented in the Kurdish region. The Iraqi Army is limited from entering Kurdistan and the KRG reserves control of the regional police. With regards to monetary policy, national fiscal policy is reserved for Baghdad but the TAL provided the Kurds the power to levy and collect taxes, including the rights of public spending.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, in addition to a legislative and executive body, Kurds have the right to interpret laws subject to their region through an independent judiciary.<sup>30</sup> Its territorial integrity is institutionalized and publicly noticed as Iraqi citizens can only travel to the Kurdish semi-autonomous region by permission of the KRG.

In addition, Kurdish leaders have been practicing foreign policy in corresponding to their semi-autonomous region. Indeed, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani has traveled to numerous countries, meeting with heads of state on behalf of the

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<sup>27</sup> Galbraith, “Kurdistan in a Federal Iraq”, in O’Leary et al (ed.) 2005, p. 273

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 272

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 272

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 272-73

Kurdish region, including with President Bush at the White House.<sup>31</sup> Barzani and the KRG has since 2003, signed numerous economic agreements with international corporations and countries without the permission from Iraq's central government. But what is more interesting is the diplomatic reciprocity conveyed by others, even visiting Iraqi Kurdistan and its leadership as if it were a sovereign state. For example, in June 2008, French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, after finalizing plans to open a French Embassy Office in Erbil, had stated that Baghdad ought to implement Article 140 of the Iraq Constitution.<sup>32</sup> At that time, France became the 13<sup>th</sup> country to establish an embassy or consulate in the Kurdish capital.<sup>33</sup> Evgeni Primakov, Russia's President of the Chamber of Commerce had similarly urged the Article's execution while expanding Russian-Kurdish economic relations.<sup>34</sup> A major legislative and sensitive matter, Article 140 refers to the normalization process and potential transfer of oil-rich Kirkuk under the authority of the KRG.

### Realism's Discrepancy

It is difficult – no matter what one believes – to dismiss realism as an international relations theory of the old world. Indeed, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the rapid rise of social constructivism and steadfastness of neo-liberal theories, the realist paradigm has consistently been attacked from all theoretical standpoints. As witnessed, it is often rare to be introduced to new theories without the direct comparison of realism. When observing criticism from post-structuralists and post-modernists, from constructivists to neoliberal institutionalists, what is notable about realism's survivability is its theoretical evolution from within. Indeed, those belonging to a contemporary third-wave of realism – referred to as neoclassical – have declared to “refine, not refute Waltz”. While undermining state unitary, these realists, unlike their predecessors, have considered the internal dynamics of states as *a source* for their external behavior – concurrently attempting to formulate a link between foreign policy and international relations.

Though rightly conceived as “a general approach to international politics, not a single theory”, all strands of realism embrace shared core beliefs about world politics that sustains the paradigm.<sup>35</sup> In the words of one notable third-wave realist: “When anomaly does appear, or ambiguity arises as the realist perspective is applied to new areas of interests, or when empirical or experimental work is undertaken to improve the explanatory and predictive precision and power of different auxiliary

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<sup>31</sup> Suzanne De Rouen, “PM Barzani meets with U.S. President at White House, *Kurdish Globe*, May 29, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Kawa Jam, “French Embassy opens office in Erbil”, *Kurdish Globe*, June 6, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Kawa Jam, “Russia and Kurdistan Region seek expansion of business relations”, *Kurdish Globe*, May 14, 2008

<sup>35</sup> Lynn-Jones and Miller (1995), “Preface”, in Brown et al (ed.) 1995, p. ix

hypotheses, change takes place in the “protective” belt, but it must not occur in the hard core.”<sup>36</sup> Though scholars tend to differ in orderly emphasis, most do demonstrate a desire to stay true to the main roots.

For instance, IR scholars within this tradition underline state-centrism, anarchy, and self-help as characterizing the international system. Likewise, states seek their goals in the context of self-interest and rationality, while emphasizing relative gains over absolute – usually in terms of materialized properties – such as military and economic power. But as further out from these alleged core truths, divergences start to become observable between offensive and defensive, structural and neoclassical. Some contend that states seek to maximize their power; others argue security. And while structural theorists emphasize the *distribution of capabilities* among *unitary actors* in explaining behavioral patterns, those claiming to be part of the neoclassical trend downplay both assumptions, rather pointing to the distinction between revisionist and status-quo states.

But even with reference to these disparities, it is unfair to batter realists over their differences among one another, as all theoretical divisions within the IR discipline claim variations. Rather, the intention of this article is to contest realist assertions over its universalism application of a dominant material epistemology. With that inquiry, looking at system alignments denotes testing them against Kenneth Waltz’s balance-of-power theory, a cornerstone of the realist paradigm. The following subsections assume just that, while establishing the overall premise that realist balancing theories ought to be an expressive feature among the Iraqi political units. While demonstrating the discrepancy in Waltz, I examine ‘refined’ balancing propositions articulated by Stephan Walt and Randall Schweller – proclaiming that both assume similar shortcomings, in large part because their theories are saturated with material variables when social ones really matter.

### ***Balance-of-Power: What Bipolarity?***

When judging systems claimed by anarchy, structural realists argue that alignment patterns are inherently determined by a balance-of-power politics. Likewise, when assimilating the Hobbesian-like anarchy described earlier, it would be presumably straightforward for neo-realists to explain Iraq by their own definitions. But as this section unfolds along with the noncompliance of realities, it becomes conspicuous that major discrepancies exist. Emerging from the Renaissance and extracted from various fields of humanities and sciences as a “metaphorical concept”, a balance of power was acknowledged and generally accepted as a *law of nature* for its counterweight logic in establishing system-like equilibriums.<sup>37</sup>

In *Theory of International Relations* (1979), Kenneth Waltz seemingly defines a balance-of-power theory through the scope of a system-wide “distribution of capabilities”, largely by military and economic means. His tripartite theory of

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<sup>36</sup> Schweller (1997), p. 927

<sup>37</sup> Schweller (2006), p. 4



international relations – that which consists of system order, differentiation of units, and distribution of capabilities – suggests that “as long as anarchy endures, states remain like units”, and international politics would then only differ with regards to the distribution of capabilities as the independent variable.<sup>38</sup>

Though not absolutely a complete “third-image” theory, Waltz admits that at the very minimum, knowing the capabilities within states is necessary.<sup>39</sup> While establishing a structural approach corresponding to microeconomic theory, Waltz strived to science realism, discounting the properties of essentialism and “human nature” most often credited with classical thinkers. Indeed, unlike the invested interest in “natural” values shared by his predecessors, Waltz appropriated state behavior in the light of extrinsic motivation, ostensibly driven by the outward appearance of the external environment, arguing that: “the clear perception of constraints provides many clues to the expected reactions of states, but by itself the theory cannot explain those reactions”.<sup>40</sup> Hence, Waltz’s main goal when examining international politics through a supposedly scientific method was to establish a *generalizable* theory – bent on confining the possibility of outcomes within a specific range of predictability.

With this general aim, the balance-of-power theory “makes assumptions about the interests and motives of states, rather than explaining them. What it does explain are the constraints that confine all states.”<sup>41</sup> To be sure, balance-of-power dynamics is not an outcome independent of its systemic setting. Indeed, for Waltz, two prerequisites were needed for balance-of-power politics to prevail: that the order of the system be anarchic and that it would consist of units committed to their survival.<sup>42</sup> With these conditions achieved, Iraq’s alignments ought to reflect a balance of power among the various factions, especially considering that significant imbalances-of-power within this context can lead to oppression and death.

But when applying the theory based on the various groups’ distribution of capabilities, Waltz’s propositions are grossly off mark. For instance, at the macro-level, the two communities of Shiites and Kurds – who also attain the most capabilities in relation to the Sunni Arabs – have claimed a general recognition in support of the Baghdad government among other initiatives. But even more illuminating, at every subsequent micro-relation all the way down to the individual politicians – those that possess the most capabilities are not only reluctant to balance one another, but participating in a partnership. Indeed, the two powerhouse coalitions – the UIA and the Kurdish Alliance – the most powerful independent parties – the SIIC, PUK, and KDP – and the most influential personalities – Jalal Talabani and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim – all claim a shared alliance.

The Kurdish front and SIIC were the only political factions with standing militias after the American invasion. To be accurate, directly after the 2003 invasion, 10,000

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<sup>38</sup> Waltz (1979), p. 93. Also see Schweller (1998), p. 16

<sup>39</sup> Waltz (1979), p. 97-98

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 122

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 121

Badr Brigade fighters had crossed over from Iran and began an intensive recruiting campaign.<sup>43</sup> Even today, the Badr Brigades and the *peshmerga* are considered the two most powerful and disciplined militias, both practicing a unified command structure. Both parties encompass considerable and direct support from their respective communities – as the 2005 elections proved. And as had been described in their respective introductory sections, both communities claim economic, political, and military supremacy in relation to the former hegemonic Sunnis.

So it is needless to say, if the balance-of-power theory were applied to Iraq, its premise would be explicitly contradicted in the idea that *less power is actually more* – the less you have of it, the more likely you will be balanced because of it. A weaker status inherits the costs and detriments of great power status. Consequently, this skewed logic inadvertently implies that the acquiring of power would concurrently make one less secure, not because of a supposed backlash from others, but rather as a function of the system. This obviously is all inconsistent with realist logic in that less power is less secure because of the dangers of a self-help culture.

### ***Balance-of-Threats: Those Belgians Look Dangerous...No?***

As noted, Kenneth Waltz's balance-of-power theory exhibits serious flaws in judging when and why Iraq's actors behave the way they do. Though this criticism is directed towards structural realists, the shortcomings of Waltz's theory should not be characteristic of the realist paradigm. Indeed, as later insisted, though many theorists pass disparaging judgment on the balance-of-power for not satisfyingly encompassing the historic patterns of international politics, it is rightly suggested that Waltz is really not to blame – that in fact – he demonstrates the same errors that all realists independently commit.<sup>44</sup>

Respectively, in attempting to put forth a more accurate picture of international life, Stephan Walt had suggested a “modification” of the balance-of-power – deeming that it would make more logical sense to think of alignment patterns through a balance-of-threats theory.<sup>45</sup> Instead of countering power disparities, states form alliances in hopes of neutralizing prevalent threats. Accordingly, Walt seeks to promote a definition in what constitutes a threat: (a) Aggregate Power, (b) Proximity, (c) Offensive Capability, and (d) Offensive Intentions.<sup>46</sup> These four variables define the degree to which balance-of-threat politics is sorted out.

In summarizing, he denotes aggregate power as a “state's total resources” – listing examples such as – “population, industrial and military capability, technological prowess” and so on.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, proximity concedes that the further

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<sup>43</sup> Allawi (2007), p. 139

<sup>44</sup> To be discussed latter, the universal realist flaw when observing alliances in this context is the saturation of material variables while neglecting the prospects of identity and attachment between states.

<sup>45</sup> Walt (1985).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

the geographic distance between two actors, the less threatening they are to one another. Offensive capability – in this circumstance – is largely contingent on the offense-defense balance. Indeed Walt claims: “states with large offensive capabilities are more likely to provoke an alliance than those who are either militarily weak or capable only of defending”.<sup>48</sup> Convincingly so, when offensive power has the advantage and “permits rapid conquest”, states that are vulnerable may find bandwagoning as the rational choice over balancing since the latter’s formation may not be quick enough to provide support.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, Walt introduces offensive intentions, but by its very implication, he perhaps steers away from the structural convention. Indeed, unlike the three previous, his use of intentionality implies the perception of the other’s behavior. The classification of offensive intentions points to actors that ‘appear aggressive’ and have a history of antagonism, suggesting that such characteristics are more likely to threaten others towards balancing against the most dangerous actor.<sup>50</sup>

To be sure, an alignment in this context is extrinsically instigated. A threat *forces* inferior actors to realize: we *must* cooperate. Though both Waltz and Walt share the basic logic between balance and bandwagon to which both are treated as polar opposites, the latter perhaps inadvertently changes their respective meanings. As Walt insists, “balancing is defined as allying with others against the prevailing threat; bandwagoning refers to alignment with the source of danger”.<sup>51</sup> Balancing by this definition is no longer about joining the weaker coalition against the stronger, but rather allying with the least threatening. But when considering the Iraq case, how accurate is it to characterize the Shiite-Kurdish alliance as a contingency derived from threat? The disintegration of their common Baathist enemies ought to question: What is the threat forcing Shiites and Kurds to ally now?

The first obvious cut would have to be the third party of the system – the Sunni Arabs. As commonly known, the Sunni Arabs, relative to the other two communities, had maintained a hegemonic position throughout the history of Iraq, even centuries before statehood. But how respectable are the Sunni Arabs as an adversary today? To be certain, a starting point will be testing against Walt’s four threat factors.

First, in terms of aggregate power, the Sunni Arabs only represent around 20% of Iraq’s total population. After the fall of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent rise of Kurdish and Shiite power, their unfortunate geography at the center of the country had left practically encircled, and cut off from Iraq’s oil reserves. Offensively, the American-led invasion and the CPA’s de-Baathification policy and disbandment of Iraq’s army, had left the Sunnis without any organized legitimate force.

Some, however, might claim that Sunni leverage is present through the insurgency or terrorist organizations. But this is unlikely to constitute a *sufficient* threat to Shiites and Kurds since the U.S. military presence shares the burden in

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Walt (1987), p. 17

confronting these groups. Moreover, though the Sunni-orientated armed groups (i.e. Ansar al-Islam, al-Qaeda in Iraq, Ansar al-Sunna, etc.) are comprehensively threatening, they are not representative of the community or political parties. Indeed, these Sunni terrorists also target the Sunni community, which had in effect spearheaded a counter-coalition among al-Anbar Sunni tribes, now widely recognized as the *Sahwa* (Awakening) Movement.

Since 2006, several Awakening councils had taken form in Iraq's other provinces, now claiming a 100,000-plus force with four-fifths of the coalition represented by Sunnis. To be accurate, many Awakening members were indeed former insurgents coming from groups like the 1920 Revolutionary Brigades and the Islamic Army of Iraq. So from this circumstance, does the *Sahwa* represent a sufficient threat in forcing the powerful Shiite and Kurdish parties to come together?

Though the Awakening represents a respectable armed force – almost certainly defining JAM and the Badr Brigade as second-class militias – several reasons discount them as a reasonable *intentional* threat. One reason is the obvious timing discrepancy: Shiites and Kurds bonded years before the tribal alliance formed. Secondly, the coalition is contingent on American support as the U.S. military pays members \$300 a month in not returning to their insurgent pasts. Thirdly, the Awakening, though being mostly composed of Sunnis, rather are a threat to the established Sunni parties, particularly those comprising the Iraqi Accordance Front, for a share of their political capital. Fourth, and perhaps most interestingly, the *Sahwa* fighters desire to serve under state authority; integrated into Iraq's national security forces with permanent positions and payrolls.<sup>52</sup>

Some however might argue that Shiite and Kurds are working together to prevent a Sunni resurgence to power. A common observation and accusation on Sunni intentionality, this idea is characteristic of the classically realist argument: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Some Sunni armed groups adopt this offensive goal, but as recognized and acknowledged by many, “The days of Sunni hegemony in Iraq are over”.<sup>53</sup> It is by all competent means inconceivable to think of an actor inheriting hegemonic ambitions when they are fighting for *minority* rights and calling for new democratic elections, to which the outcome will automatically reiterate their subordinate status.

At this point, proximity is the only reality adhering to Walt's account. Though many of Iraq's cities are ethnically mixed (i.e. Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul), the Sunni core stands in between the Kurdish North and the Shiite South. But proximity lacks credibility if the other has adopted a defensive posture, not to exclude the reinforcement of an immense lack of capabilities and aggregate resources. Indeed, the Sunnis in post-Baathist Iraq have no adequate leverage of any type to *independently* threaten Kurds or Shiites, let alone comprehensively *forcing* them to cooperate because their survival is at stake.

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<sup>52</sup> Ramzy Mardini, “Uncertainty Facing Iraq's Awakening Movement Puts U.S. Strategy At Risk”, *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, February 22, 2008.

<sup>53</sup> Diamond (2005), p. 322.

Indeed, if Walt were to suggest a balance-of-threats in Iraq, he would have to inadvertently acknowledge an inconsistent parallel to his theory: Why would Great Britain and France join together to counter a Belgium threat? The Iraq case displays a similar imbalance. Likewise, if threat was the defining feature of Iraq's alignments, a balance ought to exist between Shiites and Kurds. Though their core geographic settings are separated by the Sunnis, both super-communities retain aggregate power, offensive capabilities, and even a passable degree of offensive intentions.

The suggestion here is that Shiites and Kurds are more threatening to one another than their Sunni counterparts. In contrast to just the fraction represented by Sunni Arabs, Kurds and Shiites together claim 80% of Iraq's total population and have gained access to the country's oil supply, not to exclude controlling the most powerful governmental posts. With respect to capabilities, both Shiite and Kurdish fronts retain standing and proficient militias, overlooking given territories. In addition, these organizations have institutionalized intelligence-gathering capabilities, provided state funding, and represented by political leadership.

Moreover, the Kurdish region has experienced an economic boom as international investors seek development projects in Iraq's better half, as one Kurdish newspaper headlined: "Visiting Kurdistan Region is Like Leaving Iraq".<sup>54</sup> One recent example of this success was in June 2008, when the KRG prime minister had signed a \$4.5 billion agreement with the United Arab Emirates in building a hotel and resort complex in Arbil.<sup>55</sup> However, the success of the Kurdish regional project has threatened Shiite preference. Indeed, as Baghdad and the South were locked in security, economic, and political miseries, the KRG was debating and later implementing a smoking ban, hoping to combat the unhealthy effects of second-hand smoke.<sup>56</sup> The intellectual center of Sulaimaniya was flourishing, film festivals were commencing, as Kurdish English-based newspapers displayed affairs from around the world, including new company advertisements stating: "Coming Soon To An Oil Field Near You".<sup>57</sup> To a lesser extent, the UIA receives respectable funding and support from Tehran, while millions of Muslims each year travel to places like Najaf and Karbala – two of the most religious cities in Shiite Islam – making donations to the clerical leadership.<sup>58</sup> Arab Sunni states on the other hand are tentatively involved in Iraq.<sup>59</sup> They do not express much supportive enthusiasm, because the new state will forever now be Shiite-orientated.

To reiterate, Kurds are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims, so it would be a proclivity to assume that Sunnis will band together when Shiite power rises. Both Sunni Arabs and Kurds share the common threat of Iran and its political and security infiltration through Iraq's governmental structure. The Iranian takeover of Iraqi

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<sup>54</sup> "Visiting Kurdistan Region is Like Leaving Iraq", *Kurdish Globe*, May 14, 2008.

<sup>55</sup> "Music and Mountains", *The Economist*, p. 60, June 21, 2008.

<sup>56</sup> Khidhr Domle, "War on smoking continues in Kurdistan", *Kurdish Globe*, May 29, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> For the specific newspaper advertisement, see [*Kurdish Globe*, January 30, 2008]; for Kurdish film festivals, see [*Kurdish Globe*, May 14, 2008].

<sup>58</sup> Saadoun al-Jaberi, "Religious Tourism Booms", *Azzaman*, January 23, 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Tariq Alhomayed, "Iraq: The Arabs are Negligent", *Asharq Alawsat*, June 2, 2008.

intelligence via Shirwan al-Wa'eli, Iraq's Minister of State for National Security Affairs and UIA politician, comes to great concern for non-UIA parties.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, both Sunni Arabs and Kurds are threatened by the ambiguous ambitions of religious Shiite parties, including SIIC and Daawa. Indeed, during the negotiations leading to the TAL, religious Shiites had fought to impose *Sharia* Islamic law as the *primary* source of legality. Moreover, for the Kurds, it was clear that Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani “only reluctantly” supported the concept of federalism – which is a key issue in maintaining Kurdish autonomy.<sup>61</sup>

### ***Balance-of-Interests: Bandwagoning For Loss***

In more ways than one, Stephan Walt's theory offers a more satisfying approach than the classical balance of power. Rightly so, though his theory is less parsimonious, it is nonetheless a more encompassing approach that fills in many gaps. But as depicted and similar to its antecedent, the balance-of-threats displays gross inconsistencies when tested against the alliance dynamics inside Iraq. As suggested in the prior section, Kurds and Sunni Arabs had not allied to confront the rise of Shiites, even when both share a common religion and likewise the rising salience of another religion ought to *force* them to bond together. Of course, the Kurds did the opposite and instead allied with the Shiites. But if not out of “strategic surrender” (bandwagoning) and not out of a respectable threat (balancing), what then could have established the alliance.

Respectively so, Randall Schweller offers a balance-of-interests theory wherein he attempts to fill in what Walt and Waltz had overlooked: the “opportunistic aspect” of bandwagoning.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, like Waltz's definitions, Walt is no different when treating balancing and bandwagoning as behaviors in direct opposition to one another. Moreover, both theorists share the perception that the former behavior – not the latter – is the prevalent alliance pattern found in international history. Though confessing that perhaps bandwagoning is more frequent, unlike his predecessors, Schweller contends that inquiry should not be focused on whether bandwagoning or balancing is more common, but rather on examining the conditions under which behavioral pattern arises.<sup>63</sup> For Schweller, it is the state's orientation, not an imbalance of power or threats that can differentiate and tell us who is going to balance and who is going to bandwagon.

Consequently, similar to Hans Morgenthau's “imperialist” state, the balance-of-interests theory points to the distinction between status quo and revisionist states. To be sure, Schweller correctly points out that Waltz and Walt exhibit a ‘status-quo bias’ to which both emphasize that all states adhere to securing what they already have as non-negotiable, above all other interests and endeavors – contending that security must first be achieved before any other politics. Because of this notion,

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<sup>60</sup> Michael Ware, “Pro-Iran agency may take over Iraq's intelligence”, CNN, March 7, 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Barkey and Laipson (2005), p. 67.

<sup>62</sup> Schweller (1994)

<sup>63</sup> Schweller (1997)

Waltz and Walt put forth of a very narrow definition of bandwagon: succumbing to either power or danger, while overlooking the prospect that states looking to gain something might “bandwagon for profit”.<sup>64</sup>

In applying a balance-of-interests towards Iraq, we can assume that Kurds are bandwagoning with the Shiites in order to reap the rewards of the relationship. This is a respectable argument and more realistic than what status-quo balancing theories would suggest. But again, like the previous realist theories, reality provides another story. Though both Shiites and Kurds share interests at varying degrees on various issues, they disagree on the key issues that ought to be definitive of their polarity. Rather than defecting, the Kurdish alliance had compromised to cooperate, offering the theory that they had no other options. But such constraints on alternatives need not exist, for the Kurds and Sunni Arabs have more common interests than either of them in relation with their Shiite counterpart. As Larry Diamond had observed, in recognizing the end of their hegemonic days, Sunnis now:

...want to keep the Shiites from turning the tables on them. They want a guarantee of a minimum share of power and resources. Ironically, they have, in this respect, a common interest with the Kurds, who also wish to see the state structured in a way that will guarantee each regional group its share of national wealth and autonomy over its own affairs, while preventing any one group from dominating at the center.<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, Sunnis and Kurds had collectively opposed Ibrahim al-Jaafari staying in power as prime minister, eventually forcing the UIA to drop him.<sup>66</sup> In addition, as Henri Barkey and Ellen Laipson had claimed, Sunni “interests may well align with the Kurds in the strategic sense of their shared status as minorities”.<sup>67</sup> To a surprising extent, Mahmoud al-Mashahadani, the Sunni speaker of the CoR, had even supported the KRG’s right to sign oil contracts with international corporations.<sup>68</sup> Operating from its own passage of an oil law, the KRG has signed 20 oil and gas exploration and production-sharing contracts with 15 international companies, one being Korea National Oil – a South Korean state-owned company.<sup>69</sup> These independent economic relations bypass the Baghdad government, causing a great deal of tension between Kurds and Iraq’s Shiite government – who’s Oil Minister Hussein Shahrastani, a UIA politician, has referred to the economic projects as illegal.<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps the key interest that Kurds and Shiites diverge on is the explosive issue of Article 140 of the Iraq Constitution. Involving the reversal of the Baathist

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<sup>64</sup> Schweller (1994)

<sup>65</sup> Diamond (2005), p. 322-23.

<sup>66</sup> Kirk Semple, “Sunnis and Kurds Stand Firm on Opposition to Jaafari as Iraqi Prime Minister”, *New York Times*, April 11, 2006.

<sup>67</sup> Barkey and Laipson (2005), p. 67.

<sup>68</sup> “Al-Mashahadani: Kurdistan has the right to sign oil contracts”, *Awsat al-Iraq*, March 11, 2008.

<sup>69</sup> “Kurds’ oil deals shake Iraq integrity”, *Today’s Zaman*, June 26, 2008.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

“Arabization” campaigns, Article 140 is meant to determine whether Kirkuk – a city ethnically populated by Kurds, Arabs, Turkomen, and Chaldean Christians – would be annexed under the authority of Baghdad or Arbil. According to Peter Galbraith, “the Shi’a religious parties...are hostile to a Kurdistan region with substantial powers and are unlikely to be compromising on the issue of Kirkuk – especially because many of the Arabs who moved to Kirkuk are Shi’a”.<sup>71</sup> The Article’s successful implementation, involving the designation of Kirkuk – which holds 6% of the world’s known oil reserves – is above all other interests and the key defining issue for the KRG. The Shiite government under Prime Minister Maliki had purposely delayed the procedural provisions of the legislation, allowing it to pass the December 2007 deadline stipulated in the constitution. Though the Kurds had agreed to delay the issue, many Shiite lawmakers are proclaiming that Article 140 is no longer constitutionally valid.

By most accounts, and in communal terms, we may claim that Shiites in the new Iraq represent the status quo community. Like states of this type in the international system, though they seek interests that favor their standing relative to others, the Shiites’ general and absolute goal is to maintain their newly found majority and hold onto what positions they have gained throughout the governmental and civil institutions. In contrast, Sunni Arabs are considered revisionists in this context. They – the hegemonic power of the old days – have been marginalized to an extent where their power as a minority status is proportionally substandard. Indeed, their reluctance to participate and foster the new democracy – along with the organizational and funding capacities given to Kurdish and Shiite parties – have left them grossly underrepresented throughout Iraq’s local and national governments, from Ninawa to Diyala province, onward to Baghdad. Sunnis have been calling for new elections ever since – regretting their strategic blunder – in an effort to reassert a “respectable” and standard minority status. Key Shiites however, have tended to delay such actions recognizing that it would chip away what status they already have – reiterating their status-quo position.

With respect to the Kurds, their underlining belief was that participation in the new Iraq must at the very minimum not come at the cost of their already peculiar position, thanks to the 1991 implementation of a no-fly-zone. Since 2003, the PUK and KDP have made great strides and gains, as witnessed through the Transitional Administrative Law and the provisions set forth in the Iraq Constitution. Hence in strictly legal terms, Kurds may appear satisfied. But the political realities would more accurately situate them in the revisionist camp – because if the contemporary were taken as a status quo, Kurds would undeniably be infuriated with that circumstance.

For the Kurds, the issues of Kirkuk, among other “disputed territories”, their sovereign economic relations with international corporations and states, their resistance towards integrating the *peshmerga* into the national armed services or downgrading its armed force, among other issues is all at stake – pressured by the Shiites in maintaining their status quo footing. Until those provisions are safely

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<sup>71</sup> Peter Galbraith, “Kurdistan in a Federal Iraq”, in O’Leary et al (ed.) 2005, p. 278.



secured, Kurds are *unsatisfied with the way things are*. Indeed, the only ethnic community truly satisfied with the contemporary circumstance as a continuous reality is the United Iraqi Alliance. Indeed, as Dr. Mohammed Ihsan, a KRG cabinet minister, put it: “The Shia are afraid of their past...they have nothing to be scared of in the future because they are a majority”.<sup>72</sup> Conversely, the “Sunnis are afraid of the future, but they had a great past ruling the country. We Kurds are the ones who are afraid of both their past and the future”.<sup>73</sup> In addition, one may presume that Kurds are revisionists in that their ultimate goal – satisfied by the economic foundation provided by oil-rich Kirkuk – is to become an independent state by a complete break away from Baghdad. Though this is a debatable argument in its absoluteness, it is hitherto no secret that the Kurdish government is striving for more autonomy at the reluctance of a Shiite central government.

Nonetheless, the key point made here: a balance-of-interests theory would presume the formation of a Shiite-Kurdish alliance based on markedly contradicting interests. For instance, Schweller claims: “Satisfied powers will join the status-quo coalition, even when it is the stronger side; dissatisfied powers, motivated by profit more than security, will bandwagon with an ascending revisionist state”. But from this perspective, a balance-of-interests is fundamentally not compatible with the Shiite-Kurdish relationship, nor is it consistent with the Sunnis – since it would suggest that dissatisfied powers would bandwagon with the ascending revisionist Kurds.

The orientation of the Shiite-Kurdish partnership would presumably mean that within the same system (Iraq), a dissatisfied actor jumps on board with the status-quo power when such bandwagoning ventures – rather than balancing ones – would lead to *greater loss*, not less, and *lesser profit*, not more. If taking this line of reasoning further, one would allege that Kurds are bandwagoning not for their benefit, but against Kurdish interests themselves. Yet it would be difficult for realists, or anybody for that matter, to conceive of balancing against yourself. Nonetheless, it is in fact puzzling, that one partner aims at sustaining the current system, the other at changing it, yet an alliance is formed when these very political and potent ends are obvious and in contention with one another, especially in zero-sum terms.

## The Socializing of Alliance Politics

Contemporary realism contends that alliances are forged in order to maintain a balance of some sort (i.e. power, threat, interest). Though different strands of the paradigm may diverge in what causes state actors to balance or bandwagon, the debate’s propositions are largely invested in material and individualistic properties.

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<sup>72</sup> Crispin Thorold, “Kurdistan: A State in the Making?”, BBC News, February 12, 2008.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

In attempting to make sense of what looks like an abnormal, “going against the grain” partnership, what is introduced as its possible derivation is a socialization effect, provided by the internalization of their collective sufferings under previous Iraqi regimes. In this perspective, I argue that Kurds and Shiites came together to foster their ontological status, which had been collectively disrupted and destabilized by the horrific terror experienced under Saddam Hussein. Consequently, the prospect of this article is not necessarily to diminish realist assertions in international alliance theory, but instead to promote an underlining social dimension often left ‘undiscovered’ when observing alignments in world politics.

Common to IR theorists, realism often affiliates its outlook on politics with a supposed Hobbesian-like pessimism – in effect – proscribing theoretical claims towards a self-help international system. Yet as Alexander Wendt had pointed out, the very idea of balancing means that the actors involved have a “mutual recognition of sovereignty”.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Waltz’s “emphasis on balancing, his observation that modern states have a low death rate, and his assumption that states are security – rather than power-seeking are all things associated with the relatively self-restrained Lockean culture”.<sup>75</sup> Though to be sure, Iraq’s internal anarchy is more consistent with Hobbes than the rivalry-orientated international order. Hence, one would wonder why cooperation in Iraq is even possible to begin with. For instance, take into consideration that relation between Shiites and Sunnis and Sunnis and Kurds exhibit proclivities guided by general mistrust, unconstructive historical memories, and a lack of contemporary positive inter-ethnic communication. In contrast, this section is meant to argue that the collective victimization experienced by Shiites and Kurds under Baathist and prior Sunni regimes had transcended a mutual understanding of the other’s suffering, consequently leading to a more Lockean than Hobbesian relation between the two – which in effect had marginalized and skewed realism’s material premise on alliance politics.

To make clear, the fall of realist theories in this context is its academically rigid and uncompromising policy towards assigning universally, material variables that are consistent within one socio-cultural dimension, to another. It is not that realists believe social and identity factors are unimportant or the idea that they do not matter; rather that they treat them with constant inferiority in which social considerations *never* trump material ones. Some realists however, may just claim that the Iraq case is an anomaly; that realist theory was never meant to explain particularities. To be certain, what is happening in Iraq is indeed peculiar. But a case’s uniqueness ought not to permit its insignificance.

The question that theorists should infer: Why isn’t realist theory complying *when it clearly should*? The basic puzzle is that realism ought to be representative of Iraq, yet as demonstrated in the previous sections, it is not. The fact that the case study is a statistical paucity overlooks the underlining premise of the problem – that realist theory is mainly based off a material epistemology, conceptually top-down,

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<sup>74</sup> Wendt (1999), p. 284

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p. 285

prescribing universal assumptions while treating socio-cultural dimensions as unchanging and flat.

So far, I have argued that Iraq is plagued by an internal anarchy similar to what realists contend about the international order. Likewise, though Waltz's proposition is not expressive within the Iraq context, neither are refined theories – suggesting that the paradigm is missing not just peripheral elements that correspond to anomalies, but rather a 'basic core' that need be treated prior. Indeed, when judging the Iraq case, each inherits an imbalance of power, threats, and interests – suggesting that in order to establish an *external* stability amongst all three, a balance, rather than an alliance, is needed between the two super-communities. In essence, the puzzle for realism is reflectively two-fold: Why is there a sustained imbalance and why is there not an attempt at system-equilibrium? In other words, why are Shiite Arabs and Kurds cooperating in the first place when material considerations say they should not, and why are Sunni Arabs and Kurds not banding together when realist theories suggests they should?

With respect to these questions, I bring forth a social variable, adamantly overlooked by realist theories, in an attempt to make light of the unique Shiite-Kurdish relationship. When doing so, "trauma theory" is presented as the theoretical context – not by psychoanalytic methodologies – but in the social and cultural claim of collective abuse. Though this type of inquiry and research is largely underdeveloped, its causational aspects related towards identity formation are gaining more attention within the sociological theme of collective identity studies.<sup>76</sup> Likewise, it is imperative to note that trauma – as the term is used here – is 'a theory' of *socializing alliances* since it is not the only macro-process that could potentially lead to a collective, cross-categorization among groups. Hence, trauma theory is not the subject under investigation, nor are the claims made here intended for the purposes of its theoretical expansion as an independent field of scholarship. Rather the key assertion is that under certain conditions, social bonds may contradict material ones to a degree that abates realism's balancing propositions – the analytical aspect in which trauma is being used here.

### ***Collective Trauma: An Introduction***

Plagued by the common curse of Middle East politics, Iraq's present and future is conflicted by its past memories. While taking this thought with serious inquiry, looking into trauma can shed light into the awkward alliances that have shaped the political makeup of the new democratic state. This section lays out the idea that collective trauma, as it relates to collective violence, can help establish a theoretical framework in supporting the intentions and goals of this article when confronting realism's material monopoly of alliance politics. Likewise, portrayed as *process*, trauma is elaborated here as a social construction, giving emphasis on agency towards transcending an unfortunate event to a collective identity.

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<sup>76</sup> For sociological and political aspects of trauma, see Alexander et al (ed.) 2004; Neal (1998); Edkins (2003); and Bell (ed.) 2006.

International history is absorbed and often defined by bloody wars, epidemics, conflicts, political assassinations, oppressions, revolutions, declining empires, colonial rule, and genocide. During such trials and tribulations, trauma is felt and processed among peoples, internalizing the suffering, despair, and pain associated with the tragic experience – claiming the story as a part of *their* story. Conversely, in opposition – triumph – pertaining to ideas of glory, victory, independence, and so-called “golden eras” can also construct and generate collective identities. This is to be expected; as the saying goes, the victors get to write the history books.

But while undervalued and perhaps “undiscovered” when observing international life, trauma plays a significant role in the way societies and states attach meaning to their hardships and tragedies. In turn, those that had dealt with losses and cultural pain socially construct – in a similar epistemic logic to triumph – tribal, ethnic, societal, national, and regional identities.

However, in light of academic scholarship, what is trauma? We often in everyday conversations throw the term around and refer to one being *traumatized* as a mental state, overwhelmed by fear and shock that paralyzes our senses to react in an ordinary and rational manner. Culturally described with words like ‘shocking’, ‘violent’, and ‘terror’, Hollywood films and cultural dispensers alike will portray traumatized individuals in a state of unresponsive fixedness, mentally cut off from their social environment. Often verbalizing such experiences as being in a “state of shock”, we at the very least recognize that such afflictions bear a psychological punishment on the human psyche. But trauma is much more conceptually dynamic and likewise its consequences can be much deeper, going beyond the obvious physical and psychological; towards interrupting a group’s ontological security – destabilizing their sense of Self. Need treated within an interdisciplinary context, collective trauma – as the idea used here – can intertwine social, political, cultural, psychological, and economic dimensions.<sup>77</sup>

Piotr Sztompka characterizes trauma as “sudden, comprehensive, fundamental, and unexpected”.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Cathy Caruth described it as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events” for which “in its unexpectedness and horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge”.<sup>79</sup> Arthur G. Neal admits that trauma occurs when an “ongoing activity has been interrupted by an adverse happening that is unexpected, painful, extraordinary, and shocking...an explosive quality about it because of the radical change that occurs within a short period of time”.<sup>80</sup> Arguing against psychoanalytic perspectives, Jeffrey Alexander maintains that trauma takes place “when members of a collectivity”, whether as individuals or groups, “feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their consciousness, will mark their memories forever,

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<sup>77</sup> Suarez-Orozco and Robben, “Interdisciplinary perspectives on violence and trauma”, in Suarez-Orozco and Robben (ed.) 2000, p. 1

<sup>78</sup> Sztompka, “The Trauma of Social Change”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004.

<sup>79</sup> Cathy Caruth is quoted in [Edkins, “Remembering Relationality: Trauma Time and Politics”, in Bell (ed.) 2006, p. 107]. For original sources, see Caruth (1996) and Caruth, “Recapturing the Past: Introduction”, in Caruth (ed.) 1995, p. 153.

<sup>80</sup> Neal (1998), p. 3

and will change their future in fundamental and irrevocable ways”.<sup>81</sup> Though these portrayals are generalized, *collective trauma* is distinctive because it can bear sociological and cultural processes that become significant to the victim’s (and perpetrator’s) identity.<sup>82</sup>

As publicly acknowledged when referring to the Kurdish and Shiite conditions under Saddam Hussein, traumatic events are often present in the context of horrific violence and torture. Though violence obviously entails injuries to the body, the collective trauma witnessed in Iraq cannot be condensed into a single level of analysis since it does not just target the body, but also the psyche and socio-cultural order. In addition, the consequences of such processes are not limited to just non-Western, Third World societies, as “collective traumas have no geographical or cultural limitations” and apply to all societies “without prejudice”.<sup>83</sup> As Neal had illustrated, Americans themselves have had their share of collective memories affected by *national traumas* such as the Great Depression, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, among many others.<sup>84</sup>

Various psychological and sociological factors can lead to collective identity formation among a group, community, or even states. Collective trauma can be one such epistemic mechanism. Though different typologies exist within the contemporary literature, unlike those at the micro-level, or as some refer to as *psychological trauma*, collective trauma – as it relates to a macro political and cultural community – have significant consequences pertaining to collective identity and collective security. Distinct from individual process – collective trauma inherits “consequences for values, beliefs, and attitudes held by the mass public toward issues that it associates with the traumatic event”.<sup>85</sup> In distinguishing the micro and macro conceptualizations of trauma, Kai Erikson offered:

By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively...By collective trauma, on other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality...a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared...“We” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body.<sup>86</sup>

Rather than affecting the behavior or perceptual views of a few individuals, cultural and political trauma can impinge on large communities of peoples, even civilizations. Similar to the physical injuries of a body, trauma is damage to culture

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<sup>81</sup> Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 1

<sup>82</sup> For literature on perpetrator’s trauma, see [Giesen, “The Trauma of Perpetrators”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004].

<sup>83</sup> Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 27

<sup>84</sup> Neal (1998).

<sup>85</sup> Yaacov Y.I. Vertzberger (1997), p. 864.

<sup>86</sup> Erikson (1976), p. 153-54.

– its order, symbolic meanings, and inter-subjective epistemology – representing a tear in the social fabric that is needed to make individuals a people, part of a larger collectivity. In essence, it is a dent in one’s collective identity, impeding on one’s ontological sense of security. But instead of healing through natural biological means, repairing a cultural wound is contingent on several factors; one being the successful transformation of one’s suffering to another’s sympathy and empathy.

### ***Trauma Extension: Expanding the Circle of “We”***

As provided, trauma episodes can dynamically affect those that are inflicted. However, it can also become interrelated to which collective trauma can “create communities”, where “otherwise unconnected persons who share a traumatic experience seek one another out and develop a form of fellowship on the strength of that common tie”.<sup>87</sup> Convincingly, when others do share one’s suffering and experiences, it might be suggested that “societies expand the *circle of we*”.<sup>88</sup> But collective violence, as exhibited among Iraq’s diverse groups, does not automatically lead to a collective identity. One is simply not a causation of the other, as “events are not in themselves inherently traumatic”.<sup>89</sup> It is certainly obvious when observing the history of wars and atrocities that there indeed exist numerous examples of tribes, nations, and states not adhering to the auspicious prospects of collective identity formation.

Needless to say, the Soviet Union and the United States became mortal enemies right after collectively suffering from the trials of Nazism and fascism during World War II. Before then, Europe’s dark past had states less concerned with identity as they formed alignments amongst each other in preventing the domination by a common aggressor. A notable example of this common misfortune was the Rape of Nanking.<sup>90</sup> In late 1938, from orders of the Imperial government, Japanese forces invaded and massacred 300,000 residents of Nanking China in six bloody weeks. Unlike the Holocaust, the Rape of Nanking was widely known and acknowledged, as critical Western observers reported the atrocities to the world. Yet, the trauma had little contribution to the collective identity of the Chinese people – and unlike postwar Germany – fell flat to the way democratic Japan perceived itself.

So it goes without question, that it is empirically safe to say – and perhaps literally – that the sharing of past enemies does not *independently* constitute the hopes for a future partnership. But this is not to say that sharing enemies cannot possibly lead to sharing identities; that alliances cannot transcend from being based on extrinsic needs to being built on common narratives. That propitious possibility lies in the aspects of successful *trauma extension* in the context of empathetic

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Vertzberger (1997), p. 864. Also see Erikson (1994), p. 311.

<sup>88</sup> Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 1, italics added.

<sup>89</sup> Alexander is quoted in [Duncan Bell, “Introduction: Memory, Trauma, and World Politics”, in Bell (ed.) 2006, p. 7].

<sup>90</sup> Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 26

diffusion and morality. By this very feature, trauma is represented here as a social construction. Hence, the degree to which communities are created through common suffering is contingent on agency. As Jeffrey Alexander puts it, “for an audience to be traumatized by an experience that they do not directly share, symbolic extension and psychological identification are required”.<sup>91</sup>

As noted, though having extensive affects on group identity, not all individuals within that group directly experience the violence that is affiliated with the effects of trauma, for as Bernhard Giesen had suggested, “social constructions of collective identity are never unanimous”.<sup>92</sup> In reference to trauma experienced under violence, the method of extension can be suggested as the “reaching out” phase in what Alexander calls the *trauma process*.<sup>93</sup> To be sure, the extent of influence, in terms of identity formation in the context of cultural and political communities, the extension phase is not only a critical component for those processes, but also a determinant in linking the sufferings of the victim to a larger collectivity. This transmission can take numerous forms through cultural carriers, such as in materialistic and symbolic representations, psychological identification, myths, emotions, sympathetic expressions, empathy and condolences, cultural rituals, literature, movies, songs, education, memorials, and many others. It is through this extension, that we begin to sympathize and identify the suffering of the Other and internalize their experiences as a part of our moral Self.

Perhaps the most academically researched case in this context is the Jewish Holocaust. During the late 1940s and into the 1950s, most Americans did not identify with the tragedy that had generated the Jewish trauma.<sup>94</sup> As Alvin H. Rosenfeld once wrote about that time in America, “A prevalent attitude was to put all of “that” behind one and get on with life”.<sup>95</sup> With regards to American society, they had been the ones that defeated and ended their suffering, freeing them from the evil of Hitler, and helping establish the Israeli state. In describing a similar narrative, Deborah E. Lipstadt argued that from the end of the Second World War to the 1960s, many were too busy in the “can-do” optimistic stride prevailing in superpower America. He writes: “Those who had returned from the war were concerned with building a family and a career, not with dwelling on the horrors of the past...It did not seem to be an appropriate time to focus on a painful past, particularly a past which seemed to be of no direct concern to his country”.<sup>96</sup>

Indeed, the United States had just defeated the armies of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, claiming its status as the new global superpower, a position that had yet to be experienced among Americans. Europe by the most optimistic accounts

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<sup>91</sup> Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 199.

<sup>92</sup> Giesen, “The Trauma of Perpetrators”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 112.

<sup>93</sup> Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 26-27

<sup>94</sup> Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 214

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Ibid. For original source, see Rosenfeld (1995).

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in [Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 213]. For original source, see Lipstadt (1996).

was in political and economic disarray; meanwhile a very salient rivalry was brewing from communist Soviet Union. Even more so, Americans were dealing with their own losses in the war, adjusting their lives and in many instances, starting over. Only later, through the diffusion of Jewish trauma, did American society begin to empathize and identify with the horrific stories of the Holocaust. As dramatists Francis Goodrich and Albert Hackett put it when justifying their use of language for a play of Anne Frank's Diary:

What we all of us hoped, and prayed for, and what we are devoutly thankful to have achieved, is an identification of the audience with the people in hiding. They are seen, not as some stranger people, but persons like themselves, thrown into this horrible situation. With them they suffer the deprivations, the terrors, the moments of tenderness, of exaltation and courage beyond belief.<sup>97</sup>

Here the dramatists were focused on using symbolic extension and psychological identification in personalizing the Jewish suffering in World War II. Anne Frank's written account and personalization of *her* tragic experience of the Holocaust was – due to technological advances – identification and extension on an enormous scale, leading Americans and many others to sympathize and identify with the Jewish experience. Undoubtedly, as the sincere and touching story was translated and circulated around the world, “the journal recorded by a young Dutch girl in hiding from the Nazis, and evolved, via a phase of Americanization, into a universal symbol of suffering and transcendence”.<sup>98</sup> Rosenfeld writes:

....widely read in American schools, and American youngsters regularly see the stage and film versions as well. Their teachers encourage them to identify with Anne Frank and to write stories, essays, and poems about her. Some even see her as a kind of saint and pray to her. During their early adolescent years, many American girls view her story as her story, her fate as somehow bound up with their fate.<sup>99</sup>

Indeed, numerous examples of extension in Europe and the U.S. had been performed in what Jenny Edkins referred to as the *commercialisation* of the Holocaust trauma, arguing that the tragedy was “packaged and sold as a commodity”.<sup>100</sup> In the United States, on top of the Holocaust Memorial Museum located in its capital city, appearing in the 1990s were films like *Schindler's List* and *Life is Beautiful*.<sup>101</sup> In Great Britain, Nazi Germany was such a big part of the educational syllabus that “historians complained that it was the only period of history children were familiar with”.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Doneson (1987), p. 155

<sup>98</sup> Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 232.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Ibid, p. 233. For original source, see Rosenfeld (1995), p. 37.

<sup>100</sup> Edkins (2003), p. 165

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.



Depicted as a “cultural transformation”, the Holocaust – an atrocity inflicted to a specific group of people – has in the course of over half a century been redefined as the tragedy of all mankind.<sup>103</sup> Once fixated as an event with particular traumatic remembrance, the once ‘a Jewish torment’ had been extended through the social construction of collective trauma, as a shared universal remembrance – internalizing a sense of universal morality. In the consciousness of many, this once dormant pain now “vividly lives in the memories of contemporaries whose parents and grandparents never felt themselves even remotely related to it”.<sup>104</sup>

Hence, like many others, the Rape of Nanking mentioned earlier had failed to epistemologically move beyond China, even beyond Nanking, because of the failure to implement trauma process – the diffusion and dissemination of *their* trauma to others. Similar shortcomings can be found in the “distant suffering” of Rwanda, Cambodia, and Guatemala.<sup>105</sup> These unfortunate occurrences happen for reasons pertaining to both culture and social structure, in which the “carrier groups” did not have the interpretive capacity, resources, or authority, to circulate the victim’s burden – leaving the lessons of such atrocities neither ritualized nor memorialized.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, as a consequence of this, “new definitions of moral responsibility have not been generated. Social solidarities have not been extended. More primordial and more particularistic collective identities have not been changed”.<sup>107</sup> Trauma and its potential political effects is simply contingent on successful extension; without passing the suffering to others, victims miss out on what Martha Nussbaum referred to as “the social benefits of pity”.<sup>108</sup>

### A Historically Shared ‘Victim Narrative’

*I often reflected, when I was in solitary, that Kurds share the suffering of the Jewish people. We feel the same pain. What Hitler did to the Jews, Saddam did to the Kurds. Personally, I have great compassion for the Jewish people.*<sup>109</sup>

- Fawsi Muhammad Bawrmarni  
Kurdish political prisoner

The memories of victimization and inferiority have had a defining role in the Shiite and Kurdish narrative – ironically it being the only historical commonality

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<sup>103</sup> Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals”, Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 197.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Boltanski (1999)

<sup>106</sup> Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 27

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in [Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals”, in Alexander et al (ed.) 2004, p. 228]; For original source, see Nussbaum (1992).

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Tucker (2004), p. 79

between them. Indeed, though both communities differ in religion, language, and ethnicity, they had shared together the historic miseries the Baathists gave them. To be accurate, even prior to that distinguished era, Shiites and Kurds were systematically marginalized in political, social, and cultural participation by Sunni elites and monarchs. Throughout state history, ethnic Sunnis had dominated the Iraq Army at the officer level, and while Shiites were represented in parliament, the institution's composition had reflected a divide and conquer pattern, characteristic of colonial rule. Moreover, national educational policy and school textbooks had put little investment in Kurdish and Shiite culture – often times neglecting their heritage.

But life in Iraq was not always like this, as one would commonly assume. Indeed, the July 1958 Revolution – promoted by the ambitions affiliated with the era's ideals of Pan-Arabism – had lead to mobs dragging the bodies of King Faisal II and the crown prince through the streets of Baghdad. Afterwards, under the direction of Iraq's new leader, General 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, the first systematic attempt had been commenced at using cultural and historical memories in "officially" forging a common national identity.<sup>110</sup> Shiites and Kurds had perceived the coup leader favorably, in some respects because his mother was a Shiite, and Mullah Mustafa Barzani was invited to return from exile. But more importantly, through the functional centralization of state institutions, like the Ministry of Guidance and Directorate-General of Folklore, Qasim had begun to orderly document Iraq's culture. From community to community, the state was active in "organizing the screening of films in rural areas, and in establishing regional libraries and museums" in an effort to promote lacking social institutions.<sup>111</sup> In addition, the new leadership had in historic proportions, significantly put Shiites, Kurds, women, and other minorities to government positions.<sup>112</sup>

But these nationalist tendencies had contradicted the ambitions that had perpetuated the revolution. Originally backing the leader's promotion to power, pan-Arabists began withdrawing and shifting their support. Strategically, Qasim had begun backing away from his pro-Kurdish tendencies and after 1959, shut down Kurdish organizations, arrested Kurdish communists and nationalists, and "Arabized the names of Kurdish localities".<sup>113</sup> By 1961, Qasim had militarily engaged Barzani over Kurdish ambitions, leaving the regime vulnerable with few supporters. Consequently, the once promising era was to be short-lived.

After a coup in 1963, 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif took power, and life for Shiites and Kurds hastily drifted back towards old sectarian habits. Reconciliatory policies that had been achieved were reversed. After 'Arif's accidental death in 1965, his brother 'Abd al-Rahman took over. Though both brothers had initially sought to woo Kurds, state action took a different direction. Weak and ineffective though, the 'Arif rule had ended with another coup in 1968, ascending Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and a

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<sup>110</sup> Davis (2004), p. 110

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p. 122-23

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 118-19

<sup>113</sup> Natali (2005), p. 52

young Saddam Hussein to power – an era that Shiites and Kurds would experience their worst and most defining historical memories.

Throughout the 1970s and onward, the state began the “Arabization” campaign of Northern Iraq. Its most notable project was Kirkuk, which forcefully entitled the removal of ethnic Kurds, replacing their vacant homes with Arab families. As the ‘Diaspora’ of Kurdish history, Kirkuk is commiserated as the “Jerusalem of Kurdistan” for perhaps as many as 600,000 were forced to leave with many never to be seen again.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, the state implemented gerrymandering policies, detaching sections of the territory to assure that Kurds remained a minority. Even the Kirkuk province’s name was changed to the Arabized “Al-Ta’meen”.<sup>115</sup>

By the time Saddam Hussein pushed aside al-Bakr, an Islamic revolution in Iran, inspired by the charismatic Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, had instigated a devastating eight-year war. Known to be the most conventional since 1945, the war had claimed the lives of nearly 400,000 Iraqis, many of them Shiites, who made up most of the army. For the Kurds, what had happened towards the end of the Iran-Iraq War had “reverberated” since in their consciousness; that till this day they insist on *never* forgetting the massacre at Halabjah – a city just southeast of Sulaimaniya province. After PUK and Iranian forces captured the small town, the Iraqi government retaliated through the use of chemical weapons on March 16, 1988. Over 5,000 Kurds died that day and many thousands more injured, leaving a crushing effect on Kurdish morale. Though this was an isolated event, a large-scale atrocity was being waged during that time. Prior to Halabjah – the notorious *Anfal* campaign began and lasted until the destruction of the town of Qala Deza in 1989.<sup>116</sup> Gassing was the method of choice, as witnessed on August 29, 1988 in the town of Bazi George where nearly 3,000 Kurds were chemically gassed to death.<sup>117</sup>

Representing a modern genocide, characteristically systematic and intentional in its operation, *Anfal* was nothing short of absolute state terror, committed towards wiping out the Iraqi Kurdish population. To be sure, the campaign had affected “the entire civilian population of Kurdistan...in one way or another” for it had displaced one and a half million Kurds and depopulated half of the Kurdistan landmass.<sup>118</sup> Saddam’s cousin, Ali Hassan al-Majid – earning his notorious nickname “Chemical Ali” – was heard on a tape recovered by the Kurds after the first Gulf War: “As soon as we complete the deportations, we will start attacking them everywhere according to systematic military plan. I will not attack them with chemicals for just one day, but I will continue to attack them with chemicals for fifteen days”.<sup>119</sup> When all was said and done, 4,000 villages were destroyed and nearly 200,000 Kurds were killed – about 5% of Iraq’s Kurdish population.

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<sup>114</sup> Rubin (2003); also see McDowall (2000), p. 339.

<sup>115</sup> Talabani, “Ethnic Cleansing in Iraqi Kurdistan”, in MacDonald and O’Leary (ed.) 2007, p. 145

<sup>116</sup> Allawi (2007), p. 37

<sup>117</sup> Ibid

<sup>118</sup> Ibid

<sup>119</sup> Talabani, “Ethnic Cleansing in Iraqi Kurdistan”, in MacDonald and O’Leary (ed.) 2007, p. 146

Afterwards, many newborns exhibited tragic deformities – a constant reminder of Saddam's terror. But what was perhaps for all, the core of the Kurdish identity meant one had suffered, as one Kurd had described his personal trauma this way:

I had seen many sorrows....And I knew grief. Like all Kurds of my generation, I'd known grief in a personal way, all my life. I still grieve for my son, as I did when he died. The pain cut deep into my wife's soul. My wife cried all the time, after the death of our son. She was always so sad, always crying. When a woman cries, cry with her. I tried to comfort her....and all of our Kurdish friends and comrades in the camp tried to help her but the pain she felt was so deep, so deep. Many nights, she couldn't sleep, and she'd cry out the name of our son and cry and cry. Sometimes, I'd wake and she'd be gone. I'd follow her tracks in the snow....And I'd find her by the grave of our son....laying her arms on his grave and weeping....Now we have a daughter....Our great hope is that our daughter never sees the pain and suffering we have seen.<sup>120</sup>

Following the liberation of Kuwait – the 1991 *intifada* (uprising) had ignited on the ill advice of President George H.W. Bush, who publicly encouraged the oppressed to take matters into their own hands. Additionally, the scene of Iraqi soldiers retreating from Kuwait's borders humiliated and demoralized also stirred thoughts of rebellion. Starting on March 1 in Basra, rebels under the direction of Islamists and defected Iraqi soldiers had begun to violently form mobs, killing any Baathist in reach. In coordination with Iran's IRGC, Bakir al-Hakim's Badr Brigades infiltrated the city, and persisted an insurgent campaign. News began to spread throughout southern Iraq: Basra had fallen under Shiite control. Within days, the rebellion spread to new streets and by March 5, all major cities in southern Iraq had fallen under rebel control – Basra, Karbala, Najaf, Kut, Amara, Nasiriya, Samawwa, and Diwaniya.<sup>121</sup> In the North, Suleimaniya was the first city to fall on March 8 and soon afterwards, Kirkuk would come under Kurdish control. The *intifada* looked like a success; both Kurds and Shiites had tasted a felling of liberation; a felling of *collective triumph* – relative to a silent and notably inactive Sunni center.<sup>122</sup>

The events proved overwhelming to Baghdad, as the nearest rebel was only fifty miles away from the city. Saddam Hussein – deeply worried that his rule, like many of his predecessors, could be violently coming to an end, would retaliate swiftly. Under government orders, Republican Guard soldiers entering Basra from Kuwait began shooting unconditionally – killing women and children. Tanks that were directed to the South had attached on them the state's battle slogan: "There will be no Shi'a after today".<sup>123</sup> The brutality was unprecedented, as one Iraqi General described a massacre in the Shiite city of Hilla:

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<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Tucker (2004), p. 84

<sup>121</sup> Allawi (2007), p. 46

<sup>122</sup> For 'Silence in the Center', see Marr (2004), p. 250.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p. 49

We captured many people and separated them into three groups. The first group we were sure was made up of people who were guilty. The second group we had doubts about, and the third group was innocent. We telephoned the high command to ask what we should do with them. They said we should kill them all, and that's what we did.<sup>124</sup>

No respect was assured, for religious shrines were severely damaged, including Najaf's Imam Ali and Karbala's Imam Husayn. Saddam showed no mercy, as he televised a disfigured Grand Ayatollah al-Khoei as a part of his propaganda campaign, mocking the religious hierarchy while intimidating Shiite rebels.<sup>125</sup> Iraqi fighter helicopters allowed for prompt mobilization, as surface-to-surface missiles were first used to weaken rebel positions before tanks rolled in to finish the job. Within weeks, the Shiite rebellion was neutralized, as Saddam's attention shifted to the North. Only recently experiencing a genocidal campaign, the Kurds did not wait around for another. Millions evacuated and flocked toward the Iranian and Turkish borders, as human rights organizations and journalists displayed cities of refugee tents to the international community.

In essence, the horrendous and demoralizing effects experienced by Shiites and Kurds are largely placed under the same social context – hence the recognition in sharing a common 'victim narrative'. Like the ontological damage done when a mother neglects its child, state abandonment and mistreatment had left both communities with deep cultural scars, forever changing their respective group identities and Self-concepts. When political expediency counted, Iraqi leaders had made reconciliatory promises, only to later implement opposite policies, inflicting further communal injury. Throughout Iraqi history, both Shiites and Kurds were neglected and marginalized together by the same perpetrator. Both were systematically "constituted the primary base of opposition" towards the Sunni elites, the State, and Saddam Hussein.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, as Hanna Freij points out, both groups were subjected to "coercion and symbol manipulation" in undermining their identity and culture.<sup>127</sup>

For instance, the Shiites had been banned from participating in cultural rituals, such as the religious *Ashura* – the Karbala martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson, Husayn ibn Ali. As Ali Allawi had observed, state programs of nationalizing, "emigration and expulsions destroyed the Shi'a mercantilist class; the state monopoly on education, publishing and the media removed the cultural underpinnings of Shi'a life", not to exclude that the threat to Najaf religious order had nearly eliminated Iraq's *hawzas*.<sup>128</sup> For the Kurds, the state had neglected them as a distinct identity, only officially recognizing them as "people of the mountains". During one census survey, they were forced to register as Arabs under a program

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<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Nasr (2006), p. 188

<sup>125</sup> Allawi (2007), p. 49

<sup>126</sup> Freij, "The Iraqi State, the Opposition, and the Road to Reconciliation", in McDonald and O'Leary (ed.) 2007, p. 120

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, p. 121

<sup>128</sup> Allawi (2007), p. 146

called “Changing National Identity”.<sup>129</sup> The Kurdish language was forbidden as state educational policy was directed towards Arabizing historical memories. In collectively recognizing their receiving end of terror and systematic manipulation, Kurds and Shiites had distinguished themselves as encompassing a more Selfness narrative in contrast to the Otherness of the Iraq state. Indeed, when distinguishing this Self/Other dynamic, the Kurdish political prisoner, Khameel Yaseem Mohammad Dosky stated:

The silent Ba’athists...who turned a blind eye...the Ba’athists without blood on their hands, they call themselves, as if the jailer at Auschwitz was no different than the SS guard.... Oh, the Iraqi guards were without shame. Saddam was without shame. It was said that before the Iraqi Army would massacre Kurdish villagers and Shia villagers, first, the Iraqi Army medical teams would take their blood. Then, the Iraqis would kill them.<sup>130</sup>

The collapse of the 1991 uprising had massacred perhaps over 30,000 in weeks.<sup>131</sup> Six months after, as executions were commenced, an estimated 300,000 Shiites were killed.<sup>132</sup> Like many of their fellow Kurds, their bodies were to never be seen again. When the uncovering of mass graves began for the first time in 2003, Shiites and Kurds shared the trauma of mourning, confirming the loss of those said to have “disappeared”. Some mass graves had both Kurds and Shiites buried together. Likewise, when Saddam and prominent Baathists had been captured or killed, Shiites and Kurds celebrated and danced in the streets, often times in contrast to quiet Sunni neighborhoods. And when the United States had turned a blind eye to the 1991 uprisings, both communities branded it the “Betrayal of 1991”, as they had collectively anticipated an apology from the CPA. The point is that in the final analysis, the common traumas and triumphs experienced had ripened the rapport opportunity for Shiite and Kurdish political actors to grow in friendship; an opportunity that historic reality deemed not possible in extending to Sunni Arabs.

### Righting the Past: Cooperation Under Anarchy

*....the work of healing also involves the issue of ‘basic trust’ – this time reconstructing trust in the social institutions and cultural practices that structure experience and give meaning to human lives. Large-scale violence and massive trauma disintegrate trust in the social structures that make human life possible. Institutional acknowledgment – in the form of ‘truth’ commissions and reparations (monetary and symbolic) – and justice – in the form of trials of perpetrators – can*

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<sup>129</sup> Talabani, “Ethnic Cleansing in Iraqi Kurdistan”, in McDonald and O’Leary (ed.) 2007, p. 146

<sup>130</sup> Quoted in Tucker (2004), p. 73

<sup>131</sup> Marr (2004), p. 251

<sup>132</sup> Galbraith, “What Went Wrong”, in O’Leary et al (ed.) 2005, p. 236

*begin partially to restore the symbolic order that is another casualty of the work of violence.*<sup>133</sup>

- Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco and Antonius C. G. M. Robben

In 2008, Rauf Naqishbendi had observed, “the lack of any historic or customary mutual sympathy between the Kurds and Shiites, has rendered them incapable of uniting in any effective way, to combat Sunnis”.<sup>134</sup> Though ‘a lack’ does not imply a complete absence, his belief is exceedingly misplaced, as reality has not only reflected Sunni deficiency, but also a degree of disproportional cooperation inside Iraq. In this section, I will demonstrate that empathy does exist amongst Kurds and Shiites in terms of generalized and significant Others, where the actors involved convey sympathy towards the other macro community and express at the micro level, personal friendships. To be sure, the focus here will be on Iraq’s most significant relationship: that of the Kurdish Alliance and the Supreme Islamic Iraq Council, most notably the Talabani-Hakim comradeship.

Like most Kurds, the Iraqi President Jalal Talabani had experienced trauma in a personal way and likewise so had the Hakim family – they being Saddam’s first systematic aim on subjugating the Shiite religious community. To be accurate, Saddam had killed 10 brothers of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim’s, not to exclude several of his other close relatives.<sup>135</sup> Having shared a common victim narrative, tendered commiseration, and routinized relationships while putting into practiced their collective opposition to the Other, both Talabani and Hakim – the heads of the two most powerful coalitions – had become socialized towards friendship. As Talabani had confessed:

.....we have old historical relations with Brother Al-Sayyid Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim. Mr Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim is the son of the imam, Grand ayatollah al-Sayyid Mushin al-Hakim, may God have mercy on his soul, who was loved by the Kurds because he issued a fatwa against fighting the Kurds, whereas the sycophants of the regime supported the government against the Kurds. This made the Al-Hakim family loved and respected in Kurdistan.<sup>136</sup>

Indeed, as Iraqi Kurds have always remembered, the defining moment that had first established a historic sense of trust between the two political groups was the actions of Grand Ayatollah Mushin al-Hakim – the father of Abdul Aziz and Mohammed Bakir. Throughout the 1960s, until his death in 1970, Mushin was the *Marji’ al-Taqlid*, the highest Shiite religious authority. During this time, the state had influenced and coerced religious personalities in “instrumentalizing Islam”

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<sup>133</sup> Suarez-Orozco and Robben, “Interdisciplinary perspectives on violence and trauma”, in Robben and Suarez-Orozco (ed.) 2000, p. 5. Note: The two authors, in making this claim, were referring to research and suggestions made by T.M. Luhrmann, Carola Suarez-Orozco, and Katherine Pratt Ewing.

<sup>134</sup> Rauf Naqishbendi, “The Future of Iraq”, *The American Chronicle*, June 4, 2008.

<sup>135</sup> Nasr (2006), p. 187

<sup>136</sup> *Al-Arabiya TV* interview with Jalal Talabani, January 9, 2006.

against the Kurds. The Sunni *‘ulama* (religious authorities) had issued *fatwas* – religious orders – towards the “martyrdom of the soldier who died in Northern Iraq, and the godlessness of their adversaries, the Kurdish nationalist militants”.<sup>137</sup> Though some Shiite clerics had done the same, Mushin had “constantly” rejected to issue any such fatwa against Kurds.<sup>138</sup> Instead, he had put into practice the complete opposite, issuing a fatwa against the war waged on the Kurdish people. As Quil Lawrence had pointed out, this “courageous move” by the Grand Ayatollah had “formed a bond between Iraq’s two victimized peoples, though they were usually separated geographically by the Sunni-dominated region in the center of Iraq and the Sunni-controlled government in Baghdad”.<sup>139</sup> Indeed, directly after the religious decree, many Shiites that populated the Iraq Army began “suddenly wasting ammunition” by shooting over the heads of their original Kurdish targets.<sup>140</sup> A significant and genuine leap to socially extend, the Mushin’s munificent action had always been remembered by Kurds, as Jalal Talabani had acknowledged to *Al-Arabiya Television*:

I do not know if you have seen how Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim was received by the masses, not by Jalal Talabani. At the mass rally that was held for him in Al-Sulaymaniyah, people gave him a standing ovation and applauded for five minutes. In Halabjah he was given a hero’s welcome and this is due to both the old and new relations. We do not deny that we have *social ties* with Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim. These relations have *special flavour*. Therefore, nobody should blame us if the reception for Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim was warmer than the reception accorded to any other Iraqi politician.<sup>141</sup>

In accordance, the collective violence that inflicted both communities, had promoted the opportunity for them to together form an opposition movement. Indeed, during Saddam Hussein’s tenure, Shiite and Kurdish groups had joined forces in toppling the regime. Ahmad Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress had initially served as the umbrella organization to which included SIIC, PUK, KDP, the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan, and Ayad Allawi’s Iraqi National Accord.<sup>142</sup> Chalabi and the Iraqi Communist Party, which consisted of mostly Shiites, had stationed their operation headquarters in Iraqi Kurdistan, as meetings between Kurds and Shiites took place in Europe and Iran. To be sure, Chalabi had once gone far enough to support Kurdish self-determination in seceding from Iraq.<sup>143</sup> Though all had exhibited varying degrees of cooperation, SIIC and the Kurdish factions had initiated a formal alliance, apart from the others. Indeed, the late Ayatollah Mohammed Bakir al-Hakim had independently signed a “mutual agreement” with

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<sup>137</sup> Hakim, “Kurds, Islam and State Nationalism”, in Abdul-Jabar (ed.) 2002, p. 50.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Lawrence (2008), p. 218.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> *Al-Arabiya TV* interview with Jalal Talabani, January 9, 2006, italics added.

<sup>142</sup> Allawi (2007), p. 67.

<sup>143</sup> Galbraith, “Kurdistan in a Federal Iraq”, in O’Leary et al (ed.) 2005, p. 270.



first the PUK and later on the KDP, as the party's official website reaffirmed that his father's generous *fatwa* had promoted over the years a "historical and warm" relationship with the Kurdish people of Iraq.<sup>144</sup>

Over the decades in working together against the Baathist regime, Jalal Talabani had established personal relationships with key Shiite figures. One being the friendship of over 30 years with "brother Adil" – a reference to Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi, SIIC's most savvy politician – who Talabani admits is "close" to the Kurdish community.<sup>145</sup> Being one of Iraq's two Vice Presidents, the "pro-Kurdish" Mahdi had provided the Kurds a "more accommodating SCIRI position" on the Kirkuk issue in contrast to most United Iraqi Alliance participants, especially the defiant Sadrists and Daawa Party.<sup>146</sup> Another powerful Shiite personality is Iraq's National Security Advisor, Mowaffeq al-Rubaie, who had during the CPA transitional period, conducted himself as the liaison between the Iraq Governing Council and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. During a 2007 interview with *The New Yorker*, Rubaie described his longtime friendship with Talabani in a personal manner:

He's very difficult to define. If you are an Islamist, he brings you Koranic verses; if you're a Marxist, he'll talk to you about Marxist-Leninist theory, dialectics, and Descartes.....He has a lot of anecdotes and knows a lot of jokes. He is an extraordinarily generous person, and he spends like there is no tomorrow.<sup>147</sup>

"There are no permanent enemies for him", Rubaie professes while emphasizing the Kurdish leader's pragmatism, "But there are permanent friends".<sup>148</sup> Indeed, to be suggestive, a more 'permanent' feature in the Kurdish-SIIC alliance is arguable when one provides moral support, exemplifying social interdependence. One example of this occurrence was during an event marking the second anniversary of the Badr Brigade's political transformation to the Badr Organization. As a guest speaker, Talabani had addressed the harsh critics of the militia: "May those who describe the heroes of Badr and their Kurdish brothers as militia be doomed to failure", latter adding "You and your [Kurdish] brothers are the heroes of liberating Iraq. You, my brothers, march on without paying attention to the enemies' claims because you and the [Kurdish militia] are faithful sons of this country".<sup>149</sup> But aside from these personal and party-to-party attachments, Iraqi personalities had interestingly expressed sympathy towards the generalized 'victim community', and likewise, indifference with the former hegemonic Sunnis. In a 2006 interview, Talabani had passionately alleged:

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<sup>144</sup> SCIRI official website: [http://www.sciri.btinternet.co.uk/English/About\\_Us/about\\_us.html](http://www.sciri.btinternet.co.uk/English/About_Us/about_us.html)

<sup>145</sup> *Al-Arabiya TV* interview with Jalal Talabani, January 9, 2006.

<sup>146</sup> Allawi (2007), p. 412

<sup>147</sup> "Mr. Big", *The New Yorker*, February 5, 2007.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> "Iraq-Talabani & Hakim Back Kurdish & Shiite Militias", APS Diplomat Redrawing the Islamic Map, June 13, 2005.

Dozens of our Shi'i Arab brothers are killed every day and the Sunni Arabs do not denounce these criminal acts. Instead of doing so they demand for instance better treatment for 20 detainees placed in a small prison room. How can you compare this with that? Can we compare the killing of dozens of peaceful Shi'is in their seminaries and in their markets with the arrest of dozens of Sunni Arabs and putting them in unhealthy prison conditions?<sup>150</sup>

When speaking on behalf of his coalition, he avows: "we in the Kurdistan front stood by our Shi'i Arab brothers when they were exposed to oppression", demanding that many were "unjustly killed".<sup>151</sup> By the same token, his Shiite counterpart, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim had at numerous times publicly identified with the general Iraqi Kurd. Indeed, when questioned in 2005 about how far the next Baghdad government would be willing to adhere to the aspirations of Kurdish autonomy, Hakim answered:

The ambitions of the Kurds are well documented. Kurds are our brothers who fought for several decades and suffered greatly under the harsh rule of Saddam. It is only fair that they should demand the removal of some of the unjust laws that were then imposed upon them.<sup>152</sup>

But to clarify, the Shiite community is not a monolithic social entity. Though many Shiites empathize with Kurds, many to an extent do not. These sorts, although possessing the common wounded story, had not collectively participated in the expression of that story as had SIIC and others. Indeed, some form of 'contact' is essential for inter-subjective growth. But it is interesting nonetheless, that the threatening salience of a more identified 'Otherness' can activate once lacking sentiments. As suggested by the firebrand Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who adamantly professes no sense of rapport towards the Kurdish people, only to had furiously vowed to defend them when Turkey initiated a military incursion.<sup>153</sup>

### *Symbolic Extension*

Saddam Hussein had once said during his court trial, "My message to the Iraqi people is that they should not suffer from the guilt that they killed Kurds".<sup>154</sup> To be accurate, Shiites had populated most of the Iraqi Army, though Sunni officers, whom many came from Tikrit, directed them. Yet signs of trauma extension were witnessed throughout the post-Saddam era, from the construction of Iraq's constitutional framework to memorialization and contemporary balancing politics.

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<sup>150</sup> *Al-Arabiya TV* interview with Jalal Talabani, January 9, 2006.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> Interview of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim by Anwar Rizvi, March 21, 2005.

<sup>153</sup> AFP, "Iraqi cleric warns Turkey against Kurdish bombardments", June 10, 2007.

<sup>154</sup> "Feel no guilt over crushing Kurdish insurgency, Saddam tells Iraqis", *Gulf News*, January 4, 2007.

During the hotly contested negotiations in constructing the TAL, attempts by Arabs were directed at marginalizing Kurdish autonomy and other provisions, such as Article 61(c), dealing with the ratification of a future permanent constitution. Yet after back and forth negotiations, the Shiites on the Governing Council had ended up supporting the TAL “as it stands”, with the desired rights allocated to the Kurds.<sup>155</sup> To be sure, aspects of emotion and sympathy were present, as Larry Diamond had claimed, the Kurds “repeated appeals to the atrocities they had suffered and the sacrifices they had made...paid off handsomely in the final document”.<sup>156</sup> Though some Arabs believed “the Kurds have the right to their ethnicity” and be treated “as brothers”, others contested “dictatorship of the minorities”.<sup>157</sup>

Nonetheless, those that did share empathetic feelings towards Kurds had expressed them during the TAL negotiations, like Mowaffeq al-Rubaie had when pushing for federalism:

There are certain things we have learned from the massacres, from the Arabization campaign, and so on. One is the need to acknowledge our cultural, confessional, and regional diversity...Centralization is the source of our divisions. It has isolated Kurdistan. Southern Iraq never felt affiliated to Iraq...Believe me, whatever fears the Iraqi people are experiencing are important. If I were a Kurd, I would fear central power might stage a massacre again...We can't just forget these fears...<sup>158</sup>

One incident during heated negotiations where many participants had put down a Kurdish speaker, Ghassan al-Atiyyah, who had left Iraq during Saddam's rule, had defended: “We should listen to what the Kurds want and we should help them. I am an Arab...We have persecuted the minorities for fifty years in this country. Arabs need to correct their mistakes”.<sup>159</sup>

With respect to their savvy negotiating skills, it is nonetheless self-evident that the Kurds would not have gone as far if it had not been for their traumatic history. The TAL had secured among other provisions, Kurdish autonomy, Kurdish language, the KRG, *peshmerga*, and federalism as a key feature of Iraq's governmental structure. The passing of the TAL was self-esteemed as a historic opportunity, emphasizing minority rights and while evoking the suffering of his people, Barzani had declared, “This is the first time we Kurds feel that we are citizens of Iraq”.<sup>160</sup>

After the election of the Iraqi government, symbolic exchanges had continued after the adoption of a permanent constitution. Since then, monetary commissions were given to those that had been deported and displaced. Pre-Arabization residents of Kirkuk were moved back into the city, while payments were given to Arabs to

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<sup>155</sup> Diamond (2005), p. 176.

<sup>156</sup> Diamond (2005), p. 169

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, p. 186. Note: These quotes are not cited by Diamond, who was present during the negotiations as an advisor to the CPA.

<sup>158</sup> Quoted in Ibid, p. 130

<sup>159</sup> Quoted in Ibid, p. 186

<sup>160</sup> Rjiv Chandrasekaran, “Iraqi Council Signs Charter”, *Washington Post*, March 9, 2004.

help them move to their original neighborhoods. In 2008 for example, some Shiites and Kurds worked together to change Baathist features of the Iraqi flag, as it was a symbol of trauma for many.<sup>161</sup> Likewise, five Iraqi judges of Kurdish and Shiite origin overlooked the tribunal that had been put together in hearing the *Anfal* case – which included Saddam, his cousin “Chemical Ali”, and five other co-defendants involved in the genocidal campaign.<sup>162</sup>

One exceptional symbolic outreach had been the memorialization of the Halabjah incident, which the city’s mayor had declared “the identity of the Kurdish people”.<sup>163</sup> During the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Halabjah incident, Shiites among others had attended the ceremony in which Prime Minister Maliki was to “raise the curtain of a monument of martyr Omar Khawar”, the epitome of the atrocity, which is represented as a Kurdish man embracing his child killed by the chemical attack.<sup>164</sup> Observed with 5 minutes of silence in mourning, the Iraq government had decided to offer the United Nations a draft resolution in considering March 16 a global day against chemical weapons.<sup>165</sup>

But even when considering symbolic politics, alliances have formed amongst key Shiite and Kurdish parties, with the exclusion of Sunnis.<sup>166</sup> Yet frequent in contemporary Iraqi politics, when alliances and counter-alignments emerge and former allies become rivals, it is interesting that SIIC had always been reluctant to balance against their Kurdish friends, and vice versa.<sup>167</sup> Indeed, even when Maliki had aligned with opportunistic Sunni and Shiite parties against the PUK – KDP – IIP

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<sup>161</sup> Abeer Mohammed and Solomon Moore, “Iraq Parliament Purges Hussein Vestiges on Flag”, *New York Times*, January 23, 2008; also see Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Iraqi lawmakers vote to change flag”, *Associated Press*, January 22, 2008.

<sup>162</sup> Joe Sterling, “Saddam facing poison gas charges”, *CNN*, August 20, 2006

<sup>163</sup> “Halabja massacre is identity of Kurdish people-Mayor”, *Aswat al-Iraq*, March 16, 2008.

<sup>164</sup> “Al-Makiki participates in Halabja anniversary-Kurdish source”, *Aswat al-Iraq*, March 16, 2008. Note: According to *Aswat al-Iraq*, Maliki’s attendance to the ceremony was provided by ‘a Kurdish media source’ but until then the government had not confirmed that he was attending; also see [Erica Goode, “In Northern Iraq, Kurds Mourn Victims of Gas Attacks 20 Years Ago”, *New York Times*, March 17, 2008].

<sup>165</sup> “Govt. to call to pronounce March 16 as global anti-chemicals day-spokesman”, *Aswat al-Iraq*, March 16, 2008; also see “5 minutes’ of silence observed in Arbil over Halabja victims”, *Awsat al-Iraq*, March 16, 2008.

<sup>166</sup> Joshua Partlow, “Iraqi Shiites, Kurds Announce New Political Alliance”, *Washington Post*, August 17, 2007.

<sup>167</sup> For SIIC reluctant to balance Kurds, see [“Shiite-Sunni alliance vs. Sunni-Kurdish agreement-paper”, *Aswat al-Iraq*, September 08, 2008]; for PUK and KDP reluctant to balance against SIIC, see [Kathleen Ridolfo, “Iraq: Former Premier Pushing New Plan For Reconciliation”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 16, 2007]; also see [“Iraq: Sunni Arab Leader Discusses National-Salvation Front”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 9, 2007].

alliance, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim had criticized the government Maliki heads and had even flirted with joining the Kurds.<sup>168</sup>

## Socializing Realism

Several ideas and critiques have been presented thus far. One is a methodology similar to Avery Goldstein's – the claim that we can treat Iraq's internal order as consistent with the realist premise of international politics. From this basic assumption, realist theories ought to play out – especially in a culture defined by a *more* Hobbesian-like anarchy than the sovereignty-assured international system. Secondly, gross misrepresentations exist when analyzing the Iraq case with the “balance-of” theories articulated by Kenneth Waltz, Stephan Walt, and Randall Schweller. But with the injection of collective trauma as a derivation of the Shiite-Kurdish alignment, we ought to think of a possible formation of partnerships based on other than material sources – this bringing us towards a more *social* realism.

To be sure, Waltz's reference of bipolarity is naturally ordained by structure, surfacing as a causal aspect when two powerful actors dominate a given system. However, what is imperative and adamantly overlooked, is the “idea” that bipolarity has embedded a characteristic *social* feature, defining the relationship between the two – conceivably distinguishing Self and Other in international political life. Indeed, two actors can dominate all others, but the degree of *polarity* in bipolarity is contingent on how far apart they inter-subjectively place one another within the socio-cultural structure, not the material one. Hence, it would be a conceptual flaw to view Iraq as expressing an internal bipolar structure even though two supposed superpowers – the United Iraqi Alliance and the Kurdish Alliance – dominate the system. Indeed, as Alexander Wendt famously declared in a 1992 article, “anarchy is what states make of it”, and likewise so is polarity and an imbalance of power.<sup>169</sup>

Convincingly so, this reference is not limited to just Waltz. For instance, Walt's construction of the balance-of-threats from the four variables he provides also does not give consideration to the socio-cultural order. If his theory were applied unconditionally, France and Great Britain would satisfy 3 of the 4 sources of threats, but commonly known to all, their inter-politics is exceptionally *disproportional* to their ostensible threatening inertias. He, like Waltz, mistakenly embeds his theory

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<sup>168</sup> For Maliki aligning with Shiite and Sunni parties, see [“Shiite-Sunni alliance vs. Sunni-Kurdish agreement-paper”, *Aswat al-Iraq*, September 08, 2008]; for information on the PUK-KDP-IIP agreement, see [Ramzy Mardini, “Implications of the New Kurdish-Sunni Alliance for Security in Iraq's Ninawa Governorate”, *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, January 11, 2008]; for Hakim criticizing the government, see [Hamza Hendawi, “Maliki faces growing discontent, scathing criticism from major backer”, Associated Press, January 21, 2008]; for SIIC contemplating to join PUK-KDP-IIP agreement, see [“IIP-SIIC talks not for joining 4-way alliance-MP”, *Awsat al-Iraq*, January 27, 2008].

<sup>169</sup> Wendt (1992)

within just one epistemic framework, while discounting the other – which can too affect what a threat looks like and likewise what it does not.

Perhaps implicit, one of the main arguments the Iraq case is meant to provide is that realism, in essence, is a conception based off an epistemic flat world, reluctant to view actors as multifaceted and changing agents in of themselves. As Jennifer Mitzen observes, “No realist argument fully captures the identity effects of persistent conflict, because none acknowledges the social construction of state identity”.<sup>170</sup> Hence, from this problematic lens, realists end up ostensibly perceiving alliances as *only* occupying one conceptual dimension – an individualistic and material one. Indeed, Christopher Layne provides a similar illogic, arguing that “the reason states balance is to correct a skewed distribution of relative power in the international system”.<sup>171</sup> By this very individualistic observation, one would mistakenly only consider motivations that adopt to satisfy extrinsic needs, not ontological.

Indeed, for Waltz, a balance of power “explains why a certain similarity of behavior is expected from similarly situated states.”<sup>172</sup> Taking this into consideration, how would realists explain a condition when very differently situated states end up behaving similarly – like the Kurdish and Shiite communities in Iraq? Both are cooperating when their situated status suggests that one ought not to. Likewise, similarly situated – Sunnis and Kurds – express dichotomous behaviors. To problematically reiterate, why is there a sustained imbalance of power-threats-interests, and little or no effort at neutralizing it? The answer: both parties are *choosing* to ally, not out of structural reasons (Waltz) or extrinsic necessities (Walt) or material gain (Schweller), but more so in adherence to an *intrinsic* motive based on strengthening their social bond and *culturalizing* their collective traumas – making sure their history and sacrifice means something – in essence, securitizing their ontological status.

Charles Krauthammer, for instance, had once written that in the aftermath of Iraq’s regime change, “What was left in its wake was a social desert, a dearth of the trust and good will” needed to establish genuine democratic governance. To be sure, Iraq’s problematic underlining is not necessarily an asymmetrical distribution of power and resources, but a historic deficiency of social institutions. While lacking any sense of *basic* collectivity, the memories of its inhabitants are mostly localized, as group inter-relations were dominated by centuries of mistrust, instilled by regimes and Sunni elitists in order to divide and conquer the populous.

Indeed, since ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim, no state project was genuinely offered in constructing a national narrative. More accurately was the case that Sunni regimes since the 1963 coup were bent on social fragmentation as a societal strategy to abate regime vulnerability. Though Saddam himself had used symbolic methods to unite Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, state brutality – i.e. the 1980 execution of Grand Ayatollah Bakir al-Sadr, the *Anfal* campaign, and collapse of the 1991 uprisings –

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<sup>170</sup> Mitzen (2006), p. 343

<sup>171</sup> Layne (1993)

<sup>172</sup> Waltz (1979), p. 122

had overshadowed any memory and hope of national sentiments achieved. Hence, after the American invasion and the international media emphasis given to the so-called “power vacuum”, what was adamantly overlooked as Iraq’s essential characteristic defining its Hobbesian status was that of a *social vacuum*. As Krauthammer points out, “All that was left for the individual Iraqi to attach himself to was the mosque or clan or militia” for “Iraqi national consciousness is as yet too weak and the culture of compromise too underdeveloped” for any collective state-allegiance to be produced.<sup>173</sup>

Of course, as demonstrated, Iraq had not exhibited a complete absence of social development. Traumatic damage, like threats, whether physical or ontological, can have a socialization effect. Indeed, furtively underneath the ethnic cleansing and the historic culture of enmity, a relationship between Kurds and Shiite factions nonetheless had been constructed, routinized, and socially extended. Building a narrative upon their collective traumas, both had institutionalized Self from Other as the ‘non-Sunni’, ‘anti-State’, ‘anti-Saddam’ victims. Through this process, key players from both communities became interdependent on one another, not by political or economic means, but social and cultural needs. In effect, they achieved together an *ontological narrative* – providing that their collective sufferings have meaning and a historic presence in their memories – a narration of the Self; an idea, an emotion, a belief of what it means to be an “Iraqi Kurd” and an “Iraqi Shiite”. Hence, after the removal of Saddam, this distinct relationship had progressed forward, cooperating right away as routinized friends, leaving behind an Iraq stuck with its past suspicions and hostilities.

### ***Towards A Balance-of-Identities Theory***

For many, what is perhaps missed when observing alignments in world politics is the social residue of partnerships. As symbolic interactionism would presume, actors are socialized as relations are maintained. Indeed, alliances may form purely because of common threats and strategic interests, but through the sharing of experiences, positive interaction, and successful extension – a social and emotional attachment can spawn, an inter-subjectivity reproduced – giving relations ontological meaning when material considerations recede. With this thought, like the centrist variables of power, threats, and interests, identity can too play a role in alliance formation. Hence, in light of the Iraq case, it is proper to think about a *balance-of-identities* theory – occupying the epistemic realm that most realists and neo-liberals often neglect. Though perhaps not a “theory” in the sense that Waltz would agree with, its proposition is basic towards any thought on alliance making and ought to be taken with serious inquiry.

As noticed, an identity theory of balancing politics is conceptually different than the three established alternatives. Though it maintains the philosophical logic of equilibrium, it is based off a different epistemology, with an emphasis on

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<sup>173</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “Why Iraq is Crumbling”, *Jewish World Review*, November 17, 2008

ontological, rather than physical elements. In essence, the balance-of-identities is a conditional theory for its key determinant maintains that any inter-relation amongst actors must exhibit a system-symmetry of identification. In other words, from an international relations standpoint, no state involved can identify itself *more* towards any other for an absolute balance in this regard. This “ideal” systemic arrangement is needed for material properties to have optimal *unmodified* credence in judging alliance politics. Indeed, for realist variables to be completely “duty-free” in sorting out why states balance or bandwagon, a *zero-net* attachment, system-wide distribution is necessary. To be sure, when judging alignment patterns, no material theory is genuinely valid when all the unit-actors involved are pre-imaged by one another as “friends” and “enemies”, since the theory’s objectivism would no longer be the central defining claim.

However, to make clear, a system reflecting an imbalance-of-identity is only half of the theoretical claim, since it does not fully guarantee that such a condition would work against realist assertions. Indeed, two states can join forces against a third because *both* the material and cultural order motivate them to. Though realist variables are largely materialized properties with embedded social expressions; identity is dynamic and presents a metaphysical concept – subject to change and negotiation by agential means. Hence, a holistic approach in encompassing both orders brings us towards a framework that is *dualistic*.

As noted, the unequal “distribution of identification” *only tell us that material claims have been modified, but not necessarily to the point that they have been marginalized*. In order to judge the latter, the distinction comes from the degree of symmetry between the dualism expressed by the material and cultural orders. For example, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann had in *The Social Construction of Reality* described “successful socialization” in terms of symmetry between an individual’s objective and subjective realities.<sup>174</sup> To be sure, an analogous logic is presented here.

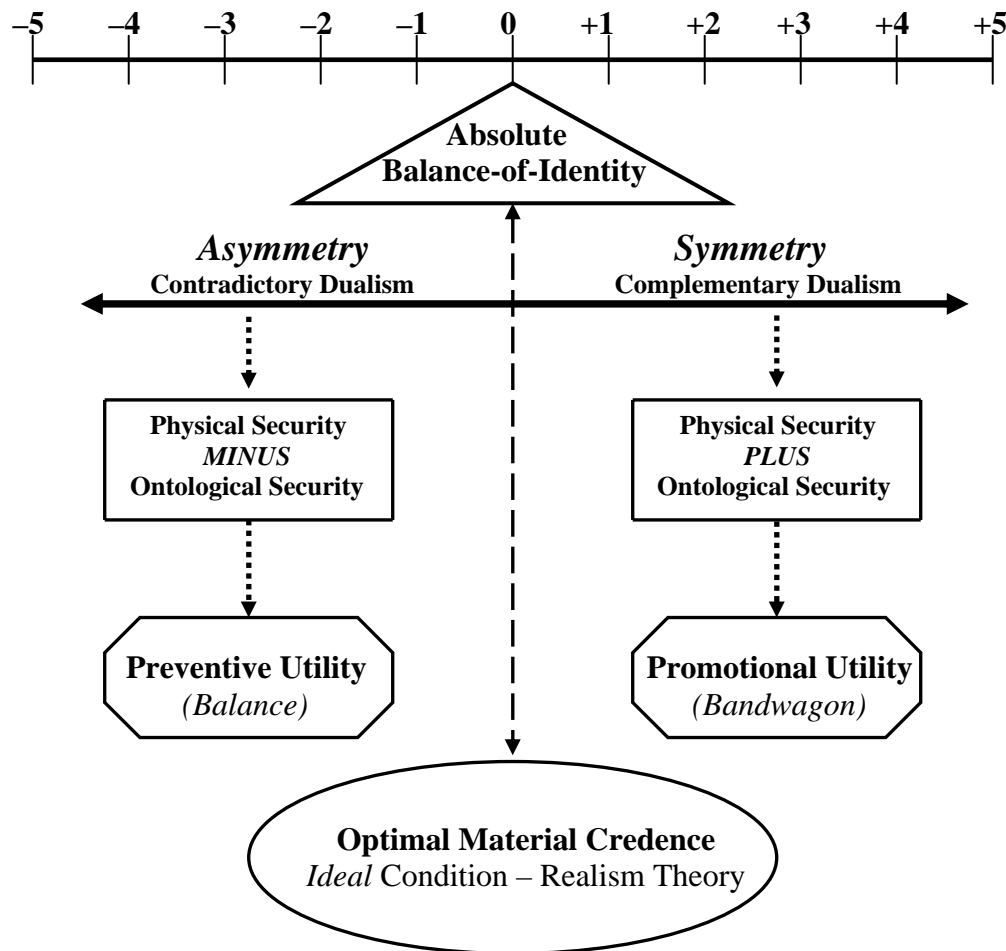
When a relative disproportion of attachment is exhibited among actors, depending on this objective-subjective discrepancy, we can determine whether identity factors will complement or contradict material considerations in forming partnerships. Hence, the balance-of-identities theory is meant to play a dialectic role from a non-materialistic position: as a cultural promotional utility (bandwagon) and a cultural preventive one (balance). In that respect, when an imbalance exists *and* a degree of symmetry is expressed between the socio-cultural and material orders – identity works with realist propositions in solidifying alliances. Indeed, this condition promotes a *complementary dualism*: both physical and ontological securities are coherently at risk. Conversely, in accordance with an overall attachment disparity, when a degree of asymmetry is defined between the material-cultural orders – identity functions in opposition with realist assertions. This condition can marginalize the political weight given to materialized-variables – in effect – exemplifying a balancing feature. Figure 1 below encompasses the identity role when a non-zero summation of identification is reflected in a given system.

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<sup>174</sup> Berger and Luckmann (1966), p. 163



**Figure 1: The Effects of Identity on Alliance Formations**



To clarify, if the balance-of-identities is absolute: identity plays neither role, promotional nor preventive, since it is metaphysically neutralized. It is the distinction between objective and subjective orders that can illuminate what part social factors would perform. In the case of Iraq, that divergence is demonstrated: social and material considerations for the Kurds are largely in opposition, where *the former is balancing the latter* – leading them to overall bandwagon with the community that materialists would assume they balance, and balance against the community that realists would suggest they ally with. This disparity exists because one relation of the triad had established a higher degree of inter-subjective rapport relative to the other.

Indeed, hypothetically speaking, if Sunnis and Kurds were history's victims in contrast to a Shiite regime, a more symmetrical feature would exist between both orders, and identity would presumably play a promotional role in forging a Kurdish-Sunni alliance. Likewise, and counterfactually directed to realist skeptics: If Iraq were ruled by continuous Kurdish regimes that had collectively victimized Sunni and Shiite Arabs, would it be probable to conceive of a Shiite-Kurdish alliance today? It would be difficult to imagine, because no sense of *collective* trauma would exist – at least between Shiites and Kurds.

When confronting realism's material fixation of the security dilemma, Jennifer Mitzen had argued that "ontological security-seeking reveals another, second, dilemma in international politics: ontological security can conflict with physical security".<sup>175</sup> With respect to the balance-of-identities, a similar contradictory dualism persists: identity formations can conflict with realist-based alliance formations; social considerations can marginalize and sometimes override material ones. To all intents and purposes, the very emphasis on social properties in alignment configurations is acknowledged to deviate from general realist theory.

To that effect, Glenn Snyder had come close; describing the role of an "identification effect" in alliance politics, but dishearteningly asserted, "these effects are limited in a multipolar system...by the likelihood that relationships will be temporary".<sup>176</sup> Indeed, he points to the irrationality behind two great powers allying against a weaker third, simply stating they "have no incentive to ally" in the first place.<sup>177</sup> John Mearsheimer asserted a similar materially-inclined logic, claiming "each side cares about the other only to the extent that the other side's behavior affects its own prospects for achieving maximum profits".<sup>178</sup> Both, in line with the traditional realist argument – in effect – overlook and disenchant the agential motive for social and cultural incentives, as an ontological service. None properly merit identity as a *necessary* feature of international political life.

Generally speaking, a world of clashing civilizations as witnessed in Iraq should put security at the top of everyone's list. Yet in such an antagonistic and uncertain environment, two groups had not defected, as the supposed *prisoner's dilemma* would presume. The fact that Shiites and Kurds instead chose to cooperate based on a sharing of the past "experiences" shows how powerful social bonds can potentially be. Directed towards the individual level, one would find it difficult not picking a loving younger brother to participate in a scrimmage football match, even though it would be rational and in his best interest to quickly pick the best player before the other side gets him – since the end goal is to essentially win. Though some of us may yield to the threat of competing against the most athletic, the idea that one would find it "difficult" may limit to how badly he wants to pulverize the other team or how enjoyable it would be after winning. At the extreme end – especially if the game involves the penalties found in world politics – some might join with friends

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<sup>175</sup> Mitzen (2006), p. 342

<sup>176</sup> Snyder (1998), p. 53

<sup>177</sup> Ibid, p. 60

<sup>178</sup> Mearsheimer (1994/95)

and family members on the opposing side, consequently going against the overall interests of one's own teammates. In this perspective, a people's collective identity – founded by emotional attachment and a social epistemology – can transcend the value invested in national identity – or in this case – team identity.

The point is, that partnerships exhibit an epistemic dualism: that actors are not only situated in a material structure, but also *concurrently* in a social and cultural one – insinuating that they also operate within a dynamic and *normative framework*, not a linear model provided by the variance of a single variable – power, threat, and interest. However, what is suggested in this article is not to be perceived as a replacement of the balance-of-power, balance-of-threats, or balance-of-interests. After all, depending on the condition, realist arguments do have a role to play when investigating alignment patterns. Unlike Walt's ostensible "modification" of Waltz, I am not bent on reinterpreting meanings. Nor is it the case, unlike the realist alternatives, suggesting a grand alliance theory of "this is why alignments happen" in world politics. Rather, a balance-of-identities proposes a social inclusion of sort, in an effort for a more holistic feature.

While bearing in mind Schweller's plea for conditionality, what is offered here may be suggested as a needed underlining principle – an addition to Waltz's two prerequisites for realist-balancing theories to play out – that any given system must not reflect *such a gross* imbalance-of-identities that would severely modify objectivist claims. In that effect, arguments made by Waltz, Walt, and Schweller may still adhere to "why alliances form" given a specific circumstance, but that is only to the extent to which their central variables (power, threat, interest) will comply with an identity-balanced environment. As Wendt had challenged if a political culture of self-help was "a logical or contingent feature of anarchy", a similar thought is assumed here: the balance-of-power is just one particular way of thinking about alliance politics.<sup>179</sup>

### *A Constructivist Version of Underbalancing?*

The refining of Waltz's original take on the balance-of-power by other IR theorists comes short of explaining many instances of states not balancing against an external surfeit of power or threats, even when it is in their best interest to do so. Indeed, Randall Schweller had recognized this discrepancy – later proclaiming an *underbalancing* theory due to a state's internal dynamics. Like other neoclassical realists, Schweller undermines structural realism's propositions that states are given a unitary assumption and that the nature of international politics is simply governed by the structure of the system. Satisfying and long overdue towards the paradigm, his theory is meant to bring forth internal conditions in explaining why the balance of power is not a natural phenomenon. He even goes on further to incorporate a state's societal characteristics as part of the equation in explaining why some leave threats *unanswered*.

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<sup>179</sup> Wendt (1992)

However, his variables – elite consensus, elite cohesion, social cohesion, and regime vulnerability – are about the temporal state of things. But moreover, his theory is characteristically mechanical, concerned with the uniform functionality of a state. Indeed, though Schweller incorporates social variables in determining what ripe conditions for underbalancing behavior look like, those variables are embedded in an operational context – wherein they affect state unitary function, not ideational transformations. For instance, “social cohesion” pertains to a strictly internal condition as “it is about a psychological feeling of solidarity within a society”, not an inter-subjectivity felt between them.<sup>180</sup> Hence, his take on underbalancing is primarily an operationally inclined negative theory, in that its basic premise serves as a constraint – enlightening us about why things that were *supposed to happen* did not.

To reiterate, encompassing a dualistic function gives the balance-of-identities a more holistic perspective: it can not only give us generalizations about alignment patterns, but also help us *explain anomalies* – understanding why some actions that were not meant to happen did and others that were supposed to, did not. Focusing on the asymmetric condition when identity plays a preventive role, the *imbalance-of-identities* can be theorized as ‘a’ constructivist version of underbalancing. While this proposition is severely different in formulation from Schweller’s, both arguments are in essence meant to explain why there is an *absence of balance* where one should be. One develops a theory based on domestic and “political constraints”, while the other emphasizes its limitations on the basis of *identification* in the epistemological context of the identity-making industry: culture, emotions, myths, narratives, historical memories, beliefs, and so on. In the operational context, actors A and B will *not balance one another* so long as: (1) A and B are inter-subjectively more Selfness in relation to the Otherness of C; (2) The value placed on materialist properties – in terms of costs and incentives – does not outweigh the value invested in the social bond; and (3) That A’s and B’s reluctance to balance against one another does not threaten the survival of neither side – as long as they believe their own existence is more important than any other’s.

To clarify, social bonds are not unbreakable. For example, a man may end his marriage to his wife in relieving a degree of punishment inflicted upon him; or defect to a certain amount of material incentives offered. If perhaps he still refuses to give in, either by valuing his loving relationship or avoiding the expectation of social sanctions received from significant and generalized others, he may yield when his own survival or when a more valued social bond (his children) are at risk. Quintessentially, the stronger social bonds are, the higher the material degree needed to break them – given the social construction of how valuable those material properties are to the actor. Relatively speaking, an exceptionally higher cost or incentive is needed to breach the US-UK “friendship” than the Syrian-Iranian axis – provided that both equally value their interest-based partnership.

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<sup>180</sup> Schweller (2006), p. 51

## An Iraqi Cosmopolitanism

“So far what has been achieved resembles a cease-fire more than a real peace”, said Barham Saleh, Iraq’s deputy prime minister during a 2008 interview.<sup>181</sup> The grim statement had elucidated the country’s political realities, often times ambiguous to the American public. To all intents and purposes, media consensus had acknowledged the success of the U.S. ‘surge’ strategy in abating Iraq’s violence and though the statistics show a positive trend in the security sector, the primary factors that had led to an ostensible safer Iraq are contingent on aspects that could easily be reversed.<sup>182</sup> Yet confidence among American policymakers has generated inclinations to negotiate with Baghdad a fixated timetable for withdrawal. But is Iraq socially, not only politically, ready to be left all alone?

In an effort to utilize the lessons associated with collective trauma and Iraqi history, it is appropriate to offer a policy prescription in confronting Iraq’s underling problem: basic trust provided by overarching reconciliation. Indeed, as Dennis Ross had recently claimed, “The continuing problem in Iraq is that Shi’a and Sunnis are not building bridges or understandings between each other either at national or local levels”.<sup>183</sup>

One particular way of building those bridges is thinking about resuming what ‘Abd al-Karim Qasim had began in 1958 – collectivizing a national identity and documenting Iraq’s distinct culture. To be suggestive, if we can think about Iraq as an internal anarchic order, we can prescribe the need for an Iraqi cosmopolitanism, coinciding with Martha Nussbaum’s claim for world cosmopolitan education.<sup>184</sup> But rather than embedding the idea of world identification, national loyalties need be hardened through the concept of Iraqi citizenship.

Genuine reconciliation entails more than just monetary exchanges and institutionalizing quotas or even righting past wrongs. At a fundamental level, it needs a redefinition in its collective identity, involving the symbolic social incorporation of the other’s narrative. Education can be one such powerful method in achieving this. Learning the traumas of all three communities under Saddam and during the Iran-Iraq War provides a real potential in constructing a distinct national identity. Patriotism and honor in serving one’s country need be emphasized among Iraq’s youth. Shiite and Kurdish elites need invite Sunnis to participate in memorializing and ritualizing these tragedies, since many of them had also suffered. In this perspective, trauma can have very auspicious effects, since it has the ability to tear and shred old fixated cultures and afterwards heal and rebuild new extensions

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<sup>181</sup> *Asharq al-Awsat* interview with Barham Saleh, February 11, 2008.

<sup>182</sup> Ramzy Mardini, “Revisiting Misperceptions of America’s Iraq Strategy”, *Middle East Times*, April 24, 2008.

<sup>183</sup> Dennis Ross, “Statecraft in the Middle East”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2008, p. 8.

<sup>184</sup> Nussbaum (1994).

as a re-socialization process. National narratives are negotiable, and the presence can change the interpretation of the past.<sup>185</sup>

Iraq today may be experiencing less bloodshed, but the relative absence of violence is not derived from general institutionalized norms or socialized inter/intra-ethnic relations. Rather it is based off external and contingent circumstances, like the U.S. maintenance of the Awakening councils, militia ceasefires, and the erection of walls separating Sunni and Shiite neighborhoods. The status of Kirkuk has yet to be solved along with other “disputed territories” that may pressure some militias to activate their status, including former insurgents within the Awakening tribal coalition. Cases of impulsive outbreaks of violence, like those witnessed in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, can be the unfortunate fate of a future, unreconciled Iraq. Indeed, but rather than the ‘political’ reconciliation being talked about as a final condition for U.S. withdrawal, what Iraq needs towards encompassing a Lockean political culture – securing societal progress from reverting to its past antagonistic nature – is the aspect of social reconciliation.

But in order to accomplish this, security must first be provided in fostering social intercourse, implying that the United States must have a substantial and prolonged presence in Iraq. Otherwise, when the salience to do so arises, Iraqis will rely and fall back on old yet established subgroup identities.

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<sup>185</sup> A good example of negotiating past narratives is Kennedy and Williams, “The Past without the Pain”, in Hue-Tam Ho Tai (ed.) 2001, p. 135-63.

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